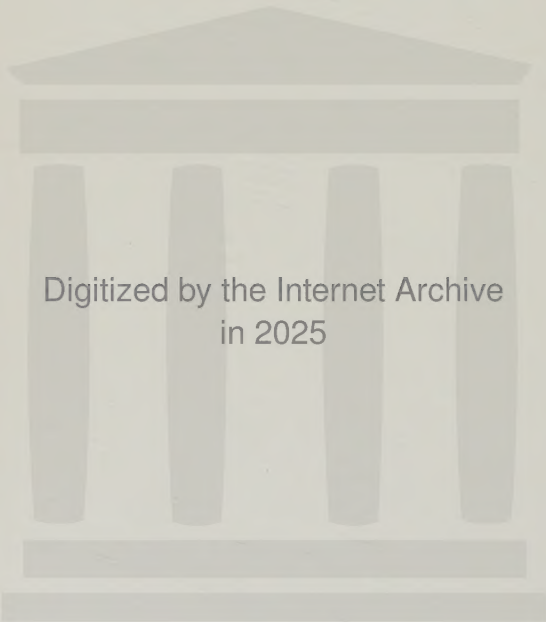






Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

BY

KATHLEEN E. INNES, B.A.

Author of

Mrs Browning and Her Poetry

Coleridge and His Poetry

The Reign of Law, etc., etc.



WITH A FOREWORD BY

DR. F. W. NORWOOD

JONATHAN CAPE
THIRTY BEDFORD SQUARE
LONDON

94980

FIRST PUBLISHED 1930

BS535

I5

JONATHAN CAPE, 30 BEDFORD SQUARE, LONDON
AND 91 WELLINGTON STREET, WEST, TORONTO
JONATHAN CAPE & HARRISON SMITH
139 EAST 46TH STREET, NEW YORK

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY J. AND J. GRAY, EDINBURGH
PAPER SUPPLIED BY JOHN DICKINSON AND CO. LTD.
BOUND BY A. W. BAIN AND CO. LTD.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
FOREWORD	9
INTRODUCTION	11
CHAPTER	
I. STORIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT	17
II. STORIES FROM THE APOCRYPHA	39
III. POETRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT	53
IV. LOVE POETRY: THE SONG OF SONGS	81
V. THE 'WISE MEN' OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS	96
VI. THE BOOK OF JOB	113
VII. ECCLESIASTES: A STUDY IN PESSIMISM	140
VIII. THE BOOK OF WISDOM: A REPLY TO ECCLESIASTES?	156
IX. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITINGS OF THE PROPHETS	169
X. THE PROPHETS ON WAR AND PEACE	193
XI. PARABLE AND STORY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT	210
XII. ORATORY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: ST PAUL	222
XIII. SOME LETTERS OF NEW TESTAMENT DAYS	230
XIV. VISION AND PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT	242
XV. SOME NOTES ON THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH	252

FOREWORD

MRS INNES brings to her work a discriminating mind and a refined literary sense. She has kept strictly to her chosen path, and has avoided theological or critical entanglements.

Her aim is a modest but none the less a valuable one. To those for whom the Bible is much more than a literary production she offers enriched understanding. To others who, for one reason or another, are out of touch with the direct teaching of the Book, she endeavours to give a renewed interest in our greatest literary inheritance.

Her touch is that of one who deeply loves the Book she writes of, but is scrupulously conscientious in keeping within the lines she has laid down for herself. She speaks of the Bible as, and only as, literature. She has the poetic sense, the dramatic instinct, and the palate for choice words.

Yet her book has more than the quality of a literary dissertation. It somehow has a tonic effect upon the mind and the moral faculties. She has caught a vision of great souls and of fateful events.

The Bible may be treated strictly as literature, but its inherent vitality cannot be altogether

FOREWORD

restrained within specified limits. It is literature – many of its passages among our most priceless gems – and yet something more.

It is said that the Bible is still ‘the world’s best seller.’ Yet far too many people are strangers to it, who might be won to a greater reverence for it if they approached it along more general lines.

Such will find Mrs Innes’s guidance through the Bible by the pathway of its literary charm a most profitable experience.

I trust for a wide use of a truly valuable little book.

F. W. NORWOOD.

INTRODUCTION

A DAILY paper recently had as one of its main headlines: 'The Bible still the World's Best Seller.' The occasion was the publication of a report of the last twenty-five years' work of the British and Foreign Bible Society. The report records that in 1928, 912,773 fresh copies of the Bible were circulated in the British Isles alone, while the average output of the Society for the last twenty-five years has been 9,540,000 copies each year.

We believe that this marvellous circulation (the output of one society in one country only) is due, not simply to appreciation of the Book as a religious manual and as a guide to conduct, but also to a realisation often unformulated, of its greatness as literature.

It is in the hope that the following selected studies may add to the pure enjoyment of some of the Bible's varied literary masterpieces that this book, based partly on broadcast talks given in the early summer of 1929, has been written.



TO
W. H. H.
IN GRATEFUL MEMORY

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

STORIES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

FOR over one thousand years the Bible, in translation, has had much influence on our greatest writers. The first outstanding Anglo-Saxon singer, Cædmon, sang its stories in verse. Its influence is strongly seen, to go no further, in the writings of the greatest of poets in the sixteenth century, Edmund Spenser; in the seventeenth century, in John Milton; and in the greatest of allegorists, John Bunyan, in the eighteenth century. Thomas Carlyle caught some of the style of the prophets in which to express his own native prophetic fervour; and Ruskin has told of the debt his beautiful English owes to his familiarity with the Authorised Version. We rightly regard it, as a whole, as the greatest of our possessions, even when we are judging it purely as literature.

While some good arguments can be put forward for the correctness of the popular acceptance of the Bible from this standpoint as one book, from another point of view the description of it as 'a whole library of books' is, of course, also correct. Constant re-editings in the original, with final rejection of what seemed out of accord with the historical and

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

religious aims which had emerged through the centuries; and the translation into English of the whole of the accepted canon in the space of a few years, at a time when our language was at its most picturesque, flexible, and characteristic stage, have given the Bible a unified and distinctive character which makes reference to it as 'one' possible. But, on the other hand, it contains volumes of narrative, volumes of poetry, volumes of proverbial wisdom and reflection, volumes of prophecy, and one book approaching the dramatic form; while at least one thousand years went to its making. From the literary point of view its contents must clearly be studied as separate types of literature each in its own group, and as parts of what has survived of the national library of a unique, ancient people.

In treating of the Bible as literature those standards must, of course, be applied to it which are applied to any other literature; we must be prepared to appreciate and enjoy it for its own sake and for its literary qualities; and analysis of these, if the work considered is worthy of enjoyment, can only add to our appreciation.

In any ancient literature we should naturally expect to find good stories – for primitive people, like children, always love stories. If they want to explain something they make up a story about it. If they want to remember the deeds of a national hero they pass stories about them from mouth to mouth, and as it travels, the story often grows, or becomes more

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘finished.’ They like best stories which tell of the kind of adventure which they would like to happen to themselves – a story with sudden changes of fortune, the beggar-boy becoming a ruler, the beggar-maid marrying a prince, and so on. And the stories in the Bible, though they tell of real persons, have many of them been so put together and rounded off as to have the characteristics of good, primitive stories. Take, for example, the very first story in the Bible – that of the creation. Without going into the critical controversies over the two versions in the first chapters of Genesis, we will simply look at this story as a type of those tales explaining ‘things that are’ which we get in many early legends. ‘How did the world get here?’ asks the awakening consciousness. ‘Where did the animals come from?’ ‘How did they get their forms and names?’ ‘Whence came man and woman?’ These are the questions answered in the story of Adam and Eve, with all the *naïvete* of an early people.

We must here, at the very beginning, take note of a characteristic of Hebrew literature – a characteristic to which we shall revert. The answers to the questions, which are given in the opening chapters of Genesis, are intimately bound up with, and limited by, the whole outlook of the Jewish people. Regarding the world as God’s immediate handiwork, and continuously under His direction and intervention, it was sufficient explanation for them to say, in answer to their questions: ‘In the beginning God . . .’

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

As a result we shall find that in general abstract intellectual curiosity and scientific questioning are absent from Hebrew literature.

But if, as a result of this attitude to created things, philosophic speculation is largely absent, it is this firm conviction of God's direction that gives to Hebrew literature an increasingly serious moral purpose, which merges into the theory of national, and finally of world history, and is the great contribution of the Jewish race to the progress of human thought.

In the Genesis stories of the creation, other specially Eastern and specially Hebrew characteristics are apparent. Notable on the literary side are the lovely phrasing and imagery. Who does not see as a picture, the cherubim guarding the way to the forbidden Eden, in the story of Adam and Eve, with a flaming sword which turned every way 'to keep the way of the tree of life,' or who fails to realise the naïve beauty of the description of God 'walking in the garden in the cool of the day,' when the guilty Adam and Eve are hiding?

The number of pictures inspired by these first pages of the Bible story is sufficient evidence of the picturesqueness which succeeding generations have found in them.

Besides the desire to explain what they see around them, another very common source of inspiration for the tales of primitive peoples is the desire to glorify, or at least preserve and show in the best

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

lights, their own racial and national history. The Hebrews were a particularly self-conscious race, and this is the motive of story after story. A strong sense of God's dealings with the chosen people permeates them and increases as consciousness of their mission develops.

Many of the stories occur embedded in dry chronicle history, and are actually part of this, enlarged and developed by some lover of stories, who saw their dramatic possibilities. Such is the fine adventure story of Joseph. This is really a cycle, or number of stories built up round the life and adventures of a national hero. It is descriptive, and so may be called an epic cycle, and it has all the elements of a good primitive story. It opens, without any waste of words, by accounting directly for the dislike Joseph had roused among his brethren. Joseph told the aged Jacob, or Israel, of his brothers' misdeeds, and also 'Israel loved Joseph more than all his children because he was the son of his old age.' There we have in a sentence the motive of the story – favouritism and jealousy in the home, a spoilt younger brother, and injured elder sons. We might easily have felt that the elder brothers were in the right, and that Joseph needed the lesson that was given to him, but the teller of the story is very careful not to let our sympathies go wrong. The terrible deed of the brethren in selling Joseph, and untruthfully telling the poor old father that he has been slain by wild beasts, prevents that. All out

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

sympathies are with the sorrowing Israel, while our interests are roused by the adventurous possibilities before Joseph as he is carried away into Egypt. At the same time the fact that the brethren want to save his life, even though they want to get rid of him, prepares us to find a little good in them later on in the story.

From the time when he is carried away by the traders into Egypt, there follows for Joseph a life full of adventure and ups-and-downs. From the highest place in the kingdom he is cast into prison. Intrigue and danger threaten him. Dreams (beloved of early peoples), which he interprets, finally win his restoration to a position of great power in the kingdom. His brethren, pressed by famine, come to buy corn of the man whose foresight has saved Egypt, not knowing that he is their brother. Then come the most dramatic and skilful touches. We wonder more than once what Joseph is going to do to his brothers. In other words, the writer uses suspense as a literary device. *We* know who Joseph is, and his brethren do not, so that his words often have one meaning to us and another to them. In other words, *irony* is used. An example of irony is seen again when the brethren, all unconscious of who their listener is, tell him the story of his own death, as they believe it must have happened. And then, note again the clever way in which we are made to feel a little pity for the brothers when, not knowing that Joseph understands them, they express sorrow for

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the way they had treated him; and when Judah, having gone surety for Benjamin, offers his life as a bondman in Benjamin's place, for fear their old father should die of grief. Then comes the 'happy ending' to the story. Israel and all his family come to live near Joseph in the land of Egypt; and so closes what is perhaps the best example of the early epic cycle, as embedded in the ancient Jewish records.

We do not demand of a great story-teller that he shall conform to definite rules and regulations which the critic lays down. Nevertheless, by examining stories, which from their permanent and universal appeal through the ages have established their claim as the 'classics,' we can find common features, without which it is possible to say with assurance they would not be great. The story of Joseph, a story for children and the childhood of a race though it is, illustrates certain of these. First of all, without question, comes the need in a story of human interest. To the writer, and consequently to the hearer or reader, the characters must be real people in *possible* (not necessarily *probable*) situations. If the interest in the people is once secured, most of the other essentials follow. The need to throw the character into relief guides the choice of incident; prevents too much haste to achieve completion of the plot; causes careful selection of dialogue and detail, and awakens the sympathetic response from the reader which is necessary for success. Of course,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

particularly for childhood, whether of a race or of an individual, sheer adventure has a great attraction, but the story of Joseph interests one in *Joseph* as an individual. As it goes on, what happens to him as a person becomes more interesting than the events themselves; and relief at the conclusion is bound up with personal sympathy. Character, even in short and primitive stories, is more important than plot; and the early Hebrew writers were interested in character and drew it with very sure touches.

Another cycle from earlier days of Jewish history is formed by the cluster of stories gathered round the name of the strong man, *Samson*. We may compare him superficially with the giants of the fairy stories of every nation. Sheer physical strength and an unusual stature appeal to the child-mind. But in Hebrew records he is destined from his birth to play his part in national history and to free his people from the oppressive Philistines, under whom they suffered forty years. Not that Samson himself was specially conscious of his destiny. His quarrels with the Philistines were personal and his downfalls were due, all his life, to his weakness in yielding to the entreaties of Philistine women. He was a rollicking type of giant, proud of his superior strength, and 'one of the people,' in the kind of joke he enjoyed. His riddles are 'proverbial' in type; his language has the figurativeness of a peasant people's. When his first Philistine wife, after sulking for seven days through what was supposed to be his wedding-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

feast, worms the reply to his riddle out of him, he tells those who bring him the answer, in vigorous metaphor, 'If ye had not ploughed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle.' In wrath at his own moral weakness, and with a certain grim humour, he slays thirty men to secure the garments promised to those who expounded it, and goes back to his own house.

There follows a series of real 'giant' stories. The hero breaks cords like flax burnt with fire; slays a thousand men scornfully with the jaw-bone of an ass; breaks green withes and new cord like tow and thread, when Delilah binds him; rises up and carries away a beam to which his hair is tied as though it were a match, and then, at the end, having had repeated proof of Delilah's desire to betray him, gives away to her the real secret of his strength. The blinded giant is taken off to grind in the prison-house of the Philistines and to make holiday for them at their feast, whither he is led by a lad. A poignant use of contrast appears in the climax of the story. The miserable giant one moment stands helpless among the feasters, then, realising that his strength has come back, he brings sudden destruction into the midst of the merry-making and fittingly perishes himself in his last act of vengeance. Even his last deed was not performed as against his people's foes. It is in reprisal for the 'loss of his two eyes.'

The whole is a pagan story of a giant's adventures and deeds of prowess. As they were against the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Philistines he became a Jewish hero, but the story can be told simply as an adventure story, and as such contains many of the elements which, as we have seen, appeal to a primitive people. Delilah, like so many of the Bible characters, has become a permanent and everywhere recognised symbol for a particular type; and the whole story is of particular interest to English literature because it was taken by Milton as the subject of his drama, *Samson Agonistes*. Enough has been said to show that the Samson of the Bible stories is no idealistic champion of a cause such as Milton conceived. Milton's Samson is a hero, with his lot rendered more poignant by the fact that the poet himself was a blinded giant, who voiced his own sublime feelings through the mouthpiece of his creation; but the dramatic possibilities of the story were the starting-point for Milton's choice, and are emphasised by him in its working out. Like the story of Joseph, on its human side it has an appeal for all ages.

As a contrast in its simplicity to the ups-and-downs, intrigues, and adventures of the story of Joseph, we may consider another early story from the Elisha cycle – that of Naaman. There is little plot, and the tale is hardly lifted out of the general narrative, but it is remarkable for its pure colour and picturesque suggestion. Like the story of Joseph, it moves from one brightly coloured picture to another. This is only another way of saying that the characters live, and we *see* them moving and

speaking across the centuries. First, in a sentence, there is depicted the mighty man of valour, 'Captain of the host of the King of Syria'—afflicted by leprosy. We realise that he is kindly and deserving of sympathy, since a little captive maid in his house can feel so keenly for him as to exclaim: 'Would God, my lord, were with the prophet that is in Samaria! Then would he recover him of his leprosy.' There is quiet humour in Naaman going at first, not to the prophet, but to the helpless King of Israel. The whole story is a sermon in right values; it is the seemingly unimportant and powerless which contributes to the desired result. Naaman, used to commanding and to servility, and being a very human character, is indignant that the prophet, whom he has humbled himself to visit, does not even come out to him, but sends a message telling him to do such a simple thing, that he is about to go home in a temper. Again, it is his servants who urge the wise course upon him, and what insight into human nature is shown in their argument: 'My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash and be clean?' To his credit, he yields, and goes back to the prophet with his flesh 'like unto the flesh of a little child,' to accept, simply and directly, the God of Israel. A final human touch is the request made that he may be forgiven, when he goes officially, with his master, into the 'house of Rimmon' for worship,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and it is with a sense of relief that we read the tolerant and understanding words of Elisha, 'Go in peace.'

The story is an excellent illustration of the skill with which the Hebrew writers tell their tales in an amazingly short compass. All non-essentials are omitted, but with sure touch the characters are brought before us, and our interest and our imagination are roused on behalf of *real persons*. Naaman goes back to Syria, and, except for the incident of Gehazi, passes out of Bible story; but his history, told in one short chapter, is one of the most living of those which speak to us from the remote past.

The interest taken in character by Hebrew writers is admirably illustrated in the exquisite story of Ruth, where, as is the case with Esther, the whole of a book is devoted to a single story.

Any one who wishes to test the story of Joseph as a story, has only to take pains to tell it well to children of about ten years of age. The story of Ruth has an appeal as permanent for older children. It is a piece of individual history, thrown into relief and isolated by the detailed narration from the records of 'the time when the Judges reigned,' and in our Bible, therefore, it follows the Book of Judges. The human interest of the tale holds the reader from the opening verses, and the exiled, widowed, and bereaved Naomi becomes at once a living person. In her sorrow in Moab, her thoughts turn again to her native home of Bethlehem, and she resolves to go

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

back alone. Then Ruth becomes the central figure of the story, and there follows what has been described by Goethe as the 'loveliest little idyll that tradition has handed down to us.' And truly a lovely little picture it is. Its charm lies most in its simplicity and apparent artlessness.

In appreciating the book from a literary point of view, two things stand out – its characterisation and its atmosphere. It exhibits the supreme skill of short-storytelling in its characterisation, and three unforgettable figures stand out from its short pages. The few words that summarise Naomi's history awaken our understanding sympathy. She had gone forth with her two sons simply as 'the wife of Elimelech,' but bereavement forced independence upon her, and she rose bravely, though sadly, to her fate. She would go back alone to her own people; proudly independent, she made no claim on her daughters-in-law, whom she could no longer help, and soon after setting out bade them go back to the land of Moab. 'And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law,' and returned, 'but Ruth clave unto her.' Ruth's declaration is a classic expression of loyal devotion.

'And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

'Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

So the two go on, but Naomi's bitterness of sorrow is not assuaged. 'Call me not Naomi, call me Mara,' she tells those of her own little town who remember her, 'for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full and the Lord hath brought me home again empty.' Her interest and hope revive, however, in the plans she is able to make shortly for Ruth, and at the end of the four brief chapters the friendly neighbours rejoice with her as she holds Ruth's son in her arms and feels that her line is restored in Israel.

The character of Ruth is as beautifully drawn as that of Nausicaa in the *Odyssey*. They are both fresh with the freshness of the early world where they played their part. Ruth stands as a lasting symbol of steadfastness of affection. Her thoughtful care for Naomi led her to the field where she gleaned 'after the reapers' of Boaz; and it was news of her kindness to Naomi that made Boaz first welcome her. The modest grace of her surrender to him in accordance with the customs of the time completes the picture.

Boaz is 'a mighty man of wealth,' whose princely station is matched by princely courtesy and uprightness. His first kindness to Ruth is an expression of his approval of her conduct to Naomi, and his language is full of dignity: 'The Lord recompense thy work and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.'

The atmosphere of this idyll is open air from

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

beginning to end. It is not merely that it is pastoral and that the scenes are out of doors. Its chapters are redolent of sweet air and open spaces. Naomi and Ruth walk together from Moab to Bethlehem. The villagers cluster round them with kindly curiosity as they arrive, and the time of their arrival is recorded as the beginning of the barley harvest. It is out in the harvest field that Ruth meets Boaz. It is out of doors, in the gate of the little city, sitting with ten of its elders, that Boaz goes through the (to us) quaint ceremony of 'buying' Ruth from her nearest of kin; and artists through the ages have given concrete form to pictures called up by the imagination when Ruth is mentioned.

To convey such fine characterisation and such a sense of background in a short story is in itself a great achievement. The directness and simplicity with which it is done are remarkable. Not a word is wasted and only essential features for the end in view are included. How great is the achievement can perhaps most readily be seen by comparing the book with a modern idyll like Tennyson's *Dora* where beauty and simplicity indeed are achieved in a masterly way, but with far more conscious effort than was displayed by the unknown author of the Book of Ruth.

The reason for the inclusion of the story in the Bible is the fact that, according to the last verses of the book, by her marriage with Boaz, Ruth becomes an ancestress of David. Such a story about a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Moabites is a lesson of tolerance to bigoted nationalism among the Jewish people, and it is of interest for this alone.

A great contrast to the Book of Ruth in all but the fact that a whole book is again devoted to the story of a heroine, is the Book of Esther. This book is an expression of the most violent nationalism, pagan in its intensity and desire for revenge. It owes its place in the canon to its reputed explanation of the Feast of Purim, but it contains much that is repugnant to modern taste.

As a piece of literature it exhibits a far more self-conscious art than the story of Ruth. It has a quite complicated plot, in the working out of which many literary devices are employed, and is a much less primitive type of story. To begin with, the background is most carefully prepared. We are indoors, in a heated and passionate atmosphere of plotting and violence, characteristic of an Eastern royal court. Here is the setting: 'The King made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the King's palace; where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold (the vessels being diverse one from another), and royal wine in abundance.' – Esther i, 5-7 (A.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

We *feel* the heavy, embroidered hangings across the door and windows; incense and perfume fill the air. We are ready for the intrigue that follows, and the dramatic situations.

Like Ruth, the Book of Esther has great human interest, and although the canvas is larger, much skill goes to the characterisation in a short space. Ahasuerus is a typical Eastern tyrant, who provides the motive for different stages of the plot. Vashti is introduced only to explain the presence of Esther as his queen, though the penalty she pays for disobedience makes one more conscious of the risks Esther is running as the story unfolds. The three characters which live and move in its pages are Esther, Mordecai, and Haman. Esther is first revealed as a docile Jewish maiden, obedient to the instructions of her cousin Mordecai, who had brought up the orphan as his adopted daughter. We judge of her beauty by its effect on others. She found favour in the eyes of those who looked upon her before she went in to the King, and she was chosen by him at once as his queen. Her behaviour is at first controlled by Mordecai, whose post in the palace enables him to watch over her. Instructed by him, she does not at once reveal her nationality, and apparently her relationship to him is unsuspected, even though she passes on to the King news of the plot which Mordecai discovers against his life. When Haman, now the King's favourite, plans the massacre of the Jews, Mordecai appeals to Esther for

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

aid. Approach to the King unbidden, she reminds him, may mean death. He points out to her that even she will not escape in any general disaster, and ends with the stirring appeal: 'And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' Esther rises to the call, and from that time onwards she takes matters into her own hands and goes forward, relentless and unaided.

The dramatic moment when the King holds out his golden sceptre to her has been often depicted, but she does not at once take advantage of his offer to give her her desire. An air of leisureliness, in spite of limitations of space, is characteristic of the good short story-teller, and the writer of Esther does not hurry to his goal. All the Queen asks is that the King and Haman should come to a feast, and she follows that by a banquet. The irony of the rejoicing of the doomed Haman at the honour done to him is biting, and is added to by his jealousy of Mordecai and the preparation of the high gallows on which he hopes to see the hated Jew hang. More trenchant still is the irony which makes Haman announce the honours to be showered on Mordecai and sets him to carry them out. The fears Haman has begun to express to his relatives are interrupted by the order to attend Esther's banquet, and there at last Esther arrives at her object. The story ends with one violent act of revenge after another, and the vindication and triumph of both Mordecai and the people.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

The contrast between Mordecai and Haman is skilfully worked out. Mordecai is genuinely fond of Esther and has been good to her, quite disinterestedly. He does not refuse promotion, but he puts first his people's welfare, and he seeks nothing through Esther for himself. The Jewish people all rejoice when he is honoured. Haman, however, is markedly self-seeking and ambitious, and he falls to personal spite. The vengeance meted out to him, and to those who would have massacred the Jews is only retaliation for what he himself had contemplated; and as in the story of Joseph, great care is taken to direct our sympathies aright. The contrasts are heightened for the sake of effect, but though the fierceness of the conclusion repels, there is a sense of dramatic fitness about the reversal of the positions of the two men. Contrast is, in fact, the main literary device used in the Book. Used, as here, without subtlety, it is a favourite device of primitive writers and is of the essence particularly of physical adventure and of the more obvious irony. We have seen its constant use in the story of Joseph. In the more delicately beautiful story of Ruth it has its place, though it is employed much less crudely. Any violence would be out of place in that atmosphere. But it is very effectively used in several of the shorter tales embedded in Bible history. A striking example is the climax of Nathan's story to the erring David. David has uttered his utmost condemnation of the meanness of the rich owner of many flocks who took away the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

poor man's ewe lamb, and abruptly there comes the shattering interpretation, accepted at once by the penitent king, 'Thou art the man.'

Another feature of the best short stories of all ages is natural use of dialogue. The extent to which it is used in the Bible stories is remarkable, and adds much to their verisimilitude. Take, as an example, the little story of Elijah's dealings with the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings xvii, 8-24). It opens with the explicit direction under compulsion of which Elijah went to Zarephath: 'Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee.'

Thus we plunge without elaboration into the story. Sixteen verses comprise this tale: only five are indirect speech, and the result is a most realistic narrative. The extensive use of dialogue, which can be illustrated from any of the stories studied, has two important consequences. The first is, that superfluous details drop off and a delightful simplicity results. The other is, that the characters live from the first moment. There is no need for the narrator to tell us what the people are like. Their own words reveal it. Even when we isolate this little story from the rest of the Elijah stories, we can infer a great deal about his character. He is a man directly under the guidance of the unseen, and he obeys the direction simply and unquestioningly. Equally simply, he issues his commands, and in faith utters his prayer for the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

recovery of the child. The widow of Zarephath is a very natural character. She realises the prophet's greatness and she gives way before the dominating certainty of his commands; but when her son falls ill, she is ready to turn round and blame him, till the miracle of the child's recovery clears away her doubts. The narrative then reverts to the account of the relations between Elijah and Ahab, which had been momentarily broken by the throwing into relief of this human little story. 'The widow's cruse' has become proverbial and the tale is known wherever the Bible is read.

On the language of the stories indirect comment has been made in noticing how it achieves its purpose. Simplicity, directness, absence of the superfluous, are combined with dignity and with beautiful similes and metaphors. Passages already quoted illustrate these points. What a much more emotional content the phrase, 'under whose wings thou art come to trust' has than merely 'in whom' would have been!

This picturesqueness of concrete imagery is natural to a passionate, artistic people, living close to nature and either actually in, or recently emerged from, the pastoral state.

One other feature, which springs also from their emotional intensity, must be noticed. There is no humour in any of the stories. Passion and humour are not easy companions, and the perpetual earnestness of purpose precludes humour. The nearest approach to such as that which we find, for example,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

in the Miracle Plays of the Middle Ages, is perhaps the rather rough horseplay of Samson, which contains a good deal of grim irony.

The editing and selection of the Hebrew literature that survives had one end in view – the establishment of the historic mission of the Jewish people, as the channel for the unfolding revelation of the moral purpose for the world, of the one true God. The intensity of this purpose accounts for the passion, the moral earnestness, the directness, and that lack of the lighter side which are the most marked features of Jewish literature, and which pervade even the many stories, told with obvious pleasure in the telling for its own sake.

CHAPTER II

STORIES FROM THE APOCRYPHA: 'TOBIT' AND 'JUDITH'

ONE of the most delightful and in some ways most characteristic of Hebrew stories from the Old Testament period is that of Tobit in the apocryphal writings. It is an excellent sample of the religious novel of a type found only in Hebrew literature. It is delightful for its *naïveté* and for the characters it depicts, and it is characteristically Hebrew in its national exclusiveness, and in the ideals it holds up for admiration.

The tale might have been told as a problem tale, something like that of Job, and like Job it belongs to the 'Wisdom' literature studied in a later chapter. Tobit, too, is a man, perfect and upright, who through trials and suffering does not sin, and is finally restored to happiness and prosperity, but there is no analogy in method of treatment or in depth of philosophy. Here is a very human story, the humanity of which does not lose with the introduction of miracle through the medium of the angel Raphael. It comes nearest in Jewish literature to modern fairy tales, but unlike such tales, in Tobit

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the miraculous is entirely subordinated to the human interest. Raphael, indeed, is himself a shrewd and amiable gentleman.

The first broad feature of interest is the machinery, which an analysis of the novel reveals.

The story opens in the first person. Tobit tells of how he was careful, in his youth in the land of Israel, to go to worship at Jerusalem and to observe the enjoined ceremonials of worship. Every detail emphasises what a good Jew he has always been. He married 'Anna of the seed of our own family.' When carried away to exile in Nineveh he refused to 'eat of the bread of the Gentiles'; and there at risk to himself he succoured the needy of his race and buried the dead. Loss of home and possessions resulted for a time, but when he was able to return to Nineveh he went on with his good deeds as before. A terrible sidelight on the indifference, and worse, as regards the fate of the exiles, is thrown by the simple record. Tobias, Tobit's son, sent to bring some poor man in to the feast in their house one Pentecost, comes back with the evidently rather ordinary news, 'Father, one of our race is strangled and is cast out in the market place.' Tobit's care for the body and for the laws of purification after contact with a corpse, leads to an accident as he sleeps apart outside, which causes a film to grow over his eyes and brings on blindness.

Like Job, he has a wife who is not very understanding, and after a small quarrel with her one day,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

he prays for release from his troubles by death. From this point the story is told in the third person, and an elaborate machinery is very carefully worked out. By a coincidence at the very moment when Tobit prays, away in Ecbatana of Media one Sarah, the only daughter of Raguel, Tobit's cousin, is also praying for death – for seven husbands destined for her have died in turn on the bridal night, and her maid-servants have mocked at her.

At this stage we are allowed behind the scenes for a moment, and are told that as a result of the prayers Raphael the angel 'was sent to heal them both' – to cure Tobit, and to bind the evil spirit who slew Sarah's husbands, 'because it belonged to Tobias that he should inherit her.' This enables us to appreciate the 'dramatic irony' of the situations which follow.

Machinery is rapidly devised for bringing Tobias and Sarah together, and for getting Raphael into the story. Tobit, still thinking of death, decides to send Tobias to fetch some money which he had left in the care of Gabael in Rages of Media. The instructions he gives to his son are characteristic 'wisdom' of an elevated kind. Very human are the injunctions to Tobias, to honour the mother who risked her life to bear him. Characteristically 'wisdom,' in their practical outlook, are those which enjoin righteousness, 'for if thou doest the truth thy doing shall prosperously succeed unto thee'; or almsgiving, 'for thou layest up a good treasure for thyself against

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the day of necessity.' A negative form of the golden rule is a far-reaching piece of advice: 'And what thou thyself hatest, do to no man'; and the yearning affection of a father seeking the best for his child, and the depths of Tobit's religious convictions are revealed in the concluding sentences:

'Fear not, my child, because we are made poor: thou hast much wealth, if thou fear God, and depart from all sin, and do that which is pleasing in His sight.'

Tobias, seeking someone to go with him on his journey, finds Raphael, who is approved by Tobit – under the name of Azarias, one of good Jewish stock – and the two set out. Tobit, all unconscious that his words actually have literal application, bids them God-speed 'and may his angel go with you.' A delightful touch, not overlooked by the artists through the ages who have depicted the journey, concludes the description of the departure: 'And they both went forth to depart, *and the young man's dog with them.*'

Another example of dramatic irony occurs in Tobit's reply to Anna's complaint at his sending Tobias away in this fashion merely for money. She is bidden not to worry: 'For a good angel shall go with him and his journey shall be prospered.' What for Tobit is a matter of faith, is for the reader, let into the secret, a plain statement of fact.

As in fairy tales, everything now happens opportunely. The fish caught on the journey provides

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the material for saving Sarah and healing Tobias. Raphael, under the guise of Azarias, becomes at once the leader and is in control of events, and Tobias, subdued by a power he does not recognise, defers to him in all things. Raphael tells him of Sarah, recommends her as his bride, and reassures him about victory over the devil who haunts her.

Tobias is recognised by Raguel from his likeness to Tobit, and on his saying that he is Tobit's son, is welcomed, in a sidelight on Tobit's character, as 'the son of an honest and good man.' The picture given us of Raguel is of 'an honest and good man' also: he laments in sympathy over Tobit's blindness; he and his family show every hospitality to their guests; on hearing Tobias's intentions to take Sarah as his wife, he tells him her story in frank warning. When Tobias and Sarah are left together Raguel cannot believe that the curse which has pursued Sarah is lifted, and with grim humour it is recorded that he busied himself digging for Tobias a grave – which, on learning that Tobias is alive, he causes his servants to fill. Meanwhile, Tobias, following Raphael's instructions, has driven away the devil with the smoke and smell of the burning heart and liver of the fish, and with geographical accuracy we are told that the devil 'fled into the uttermost part of Egypt and the angel bound him.' No doubt Egypt was regarded by the Hebrews as a suitable place for devils.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

During the wedding-feast of fourteen days, Raphael fetches the money they had set out to seek from Gabael, and they are ready to return.

Tobit, meanwhile, counting the days, is anxious about Gabael and his money. Anna, characteristically, is sure that Tobias is dead, and refuses to be comforted by day or by night. Tobias, fortunately, insists on returning to Nineveh when the wedding-feast is over. The farewell between Sarah and her parents is a charming and natural picture of family relations. Raguel is careful to give instructions as to *behaviour* to his daughter. She is bidden to 'honour thy father and thy mother-in-law,' and 'let me hear a good report of thee.' Edna, anxious for her daughter's *welfare*, speaks to Tobias, 'Behold, I commit my daughter unto thee in special trust.'

As the travellers approach Nineveh, Raphael lays plans for the completion of his charge. Tobit's blindness has still to be healed, and, giving careful instructions as to how the gall of the fish is to be used for this, he goes ahead with Tobias, 'and the dog went after them.' Weeping for joy the parents receive their son, and then Tobit, who now sees, goes out 'rejoicing and blessing God' to welcome Sarah.

An incident, with some humour in it, but which adds to the kindly feeling we already have for Tobit and Tobias, is their attempt to pay Raphael for his services. Tobit wishes him given more than is strictly owing. Tobias urges, 'give him the half of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

those things which I have brought,' and Tobit agrees 'It is due to him.'

It is Raphael's turn to give good parting advice, which fittingly includes commendation for generosity and almsgiving; and then he tells them who he is, and after calming their fears, disappears. With his exit the miraculous part of the story is ended, and the further conclusion is the conventional record of an honoured old age for Tobit, and for Tobias, who moves with his family away from Nineveh, and with poetic justice lives to rejoice in the overthrow of that city, where his people had suffered so greatly.

The care expended on the framework of the story of Tobit is the most obvious of its features. Every incident is prepared for. No loose ends are left untied or forgotten. Coincidence, operating in places far separated, is made use of to give the impression of a rounded whole, designed without the knowledge of the actors, by an outside craftsman – one of the lessons which the narrator wishes to convey. Even the dog, though he takes no part in the action, is brought safely home again. But the care extends beyond the framework.

Whatever the particular purpose of the story, in general it is designed to uphold the observance, amid the temptations of heathendom, of those customs which did so much to preserve the identity of the Jewish people. The giving of tithes and of alms, the burial of the dead, and the performance

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

of the rites connected with it are advocated by example on every opportunity.

Tobit's virtues include, as has been shown, first of all, worship and tithe-giving at Jerusalem, when others in the northern kingdom stayed at home and worshipped Baal; the choosing of a wife from his own kin; and refusal to eat of the bread of the Gentiles. In Nineveh, he records, 'I did many alms-deeds *to my brethren*,' and it was help to those of his race that brought him to poverty. Tobias is bidden to choose one of his own kin as wife, and the hospitality offered at once by Raguel and Edna to him and to Raphael, is as between members of a family. Such a story does much to explain the tenacity and power of survival of a small, scattered people.

There has been a good deal of discussion as to the setting of the story, the theory that it has a Persian background being the most usually accepted. This is supported by the introduction of a bad spirit, the devil Asmodeus, and a good, in the person of Raphael. Both have their counterparts in Persian legend and are features which do not occur in the same way elsewhere in Hebrew literature. Curiously enough, the dog also is an un-Jewish feature, and he is not to be found in the Hebrew versions of the story.

As a picture of Jewish life in exile, the interest of Tobit is great. There is freedom to own property, to move about, to live, up to a point, in accordance with Jewish custom; but coupled with this there is the temptation to the exiles to give up the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

distinctive Hebrew ways, to mingle with a heathen people and drift away from their fathers' God. It is to counteract this tendency in general that Tobit is written. There is a cruel lack of regard for the life of those of Jewish race, and there is positive danger in the maintenance of such customs as the burial of the dead; while those who defied the authorities must, as Tobit knew, be prepared to pay the penalty. No wonder that their eyes turned to a restored and idealised Jerusalem, such as Tobit depicted in his prayer of rejoicing about Tobias's return:

'Rejoice and be exceeding glad for the sons of the righteous:

For they shall be gathered together and shall bless the Lord of the righteous.

.

'For Jerusalem shall be builded with sapphires, emeralds and precious stones;

Thy walls and towers and battlements with pure gold

.

'And all her streets shall say, Hallelujah, and give praise

Saying, Blessed is God, – which hath exalted thee for ever.'

Tobit xiii, 13, 16, 18 (R.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

The feature of chief interest, however, in this religious novel, is not the structure or the setting, but the characterisation. The 'wise men' of Israel were keen students of human nature, and if at times, as we shall see later, in examining Proverbs, they displayed a cynical attitude to life, where, as in the case of Tobit, they became interested in a person, we have a fine portrayal. Tobit is revealed by his actions, as well as by the witness of others, as a good man, self-sacrificing, gentle and considerate and simple in the best sense in his straightforward dealings. His is a reverent nature; but he clings to traditional ways, not from convention, but because he clearly sees in so doing the hope of his people's future. He is the head of a God-fearing Jewish household. Tobias obeys and honours his parents, and follows in his father's steps. While righteousness and almsgiving are recommended if not because, at least with the conviction that they will bring blessing, both father and son are generous beyond all necessity to those who help them. Tobit's character is contrasted with that of the rather querulous Anna, towards whom he shows exemplary restraint and forbearance, both when she taunts him for his 'alms and righteous deeds,' and when blaming him she takes the gloomiest view of Tobias's prolonged absence.

A charming family picture, with subtle touches true to life, is that of the household of Raguel and

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Edna, with Sarah, their daughter. These two are united in sentiment, and have shared hitherto in a common sorrow. Sarah, in it, thinks chiefly of her father. All three share in the grief over Tobit's blindness, and in doing all they can to show a truly Eastern hospitality to his son. Raguel's generosity to his son-in-law extends to 'half his goods, servants, and cattle, and money,' and blessings on both sides mark their parting.

The story may have been, and no doubt was, written with a special moral purpose in view, but as in the stories of Ruth and Esther, while the special purpose has lost its application over the centuries, the story-teller himself has been caught by the interest of the character he was portraying, and thereby has achieved immortality.

*

Another apocryphal story, as grim and as relentlessly triumphant as Esther's, is one with a woman again as hero, that of Judith. It is a story of national triumph over the hated and feared Holofernes, Captain of Nebuchadnezzar's host, but though no doubt its nationalism accounts for its preservation, the interest is wholly centred in the character of the heroine. Holofernes, sent out to punish with the sword a people who had defied Nebuchadnezzar, infests the little city of Bethulia, till its water fails, and its inhabitants, in despair, cry to the governor to deliver up the city. He promises to do so in five days if no help comes;

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and it is at this point that Judith, a beautiful and wealthy widow of the city, with a long Jewish descent, comes upon the scene. From that moment, like Esther, she takes things boldly into her own hands, and she has no doubt of her mission: 'Hear me, I will do a thing which shall go down to all generations among the children of our race'; and after humiliation and prayer she goes forth with one handmaiden, as the instrument through whose deed every nation and tribe shall come to know the power of the God 'that protecteth the race of Israel.' The horror of the story is largely redeemed by the delicacy with which her character is depicted. She does not go forth boasting of her own strength, but praying for help from 'the upholder of the weak.' Her humiliation is genuine. The gay adornment of her person, which follows, is a conscious playing of the part she has set herself, 'to beguile the eyes of all men that should see her.' Her beauty is described by its results. The elders of the city 'wondered at (it) very exceedingly,' and believe it will be sufficient to help her to accomplish her purpose.

Both Holofernes and his servants 'marvelled at the beauty of her countenance.' Like Esther, she is a strong enough character to keep her plans entirely to herself, and not to risk spoiling them by any haste to achieve her end. Her power of intellect is as great as her beauty, and she uses both to subdue Holofernes, so that he pays tribute

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

to the wit and wisdom of her words. 'There is not,' he exclaims, 'such a woman from one end of the earth to the other for beauty of face and wisdom of words.'

At obvious risk to herself she remains three days in his camp in order to establish the idea that she shall go forth each night to prayer; but she will not eat of his provisions, or with him, till the fourth day. With a biting irony that means one thing to him – as he believes she has come to betray her people – and another to her and to us – she tells him that the simple provisions she has brought with her will last her 'until the Lord work by my hand the things that He hath determined.'

The mistake is never made of letting us feel any sympathy with Holofernes. He is a brutal conqueror, who walks straight into her trap and 'was watching for a time to deceive her from the day he had seen her,' and by the fourth day she knows him well enough to venture everything on her certainty of success. The irony is again scathing when she tells him she will eat and drink freely with him now, for this is the greatest evening of her life.

In the long feasting we feel that Holofernes is entirely sensual, while Judith is seeking nothing for herself, and can pause to pray before her horrible deed. She does not glory in her achievement for herself; she has, she feels, been merely

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the instrument in God's hand for the destruction of the enemies of His people, and when it is over the people first praise Him. She takes nothing for herself of the booty given to her from Holofernes' tent, after the final victory, and she goes quietly back to the life of a widow in Bethulia, and dies in old age honouring her husband's memory.

The only passage where the tone is distasteful to modern feeling (apart from the horrible nature of the deed) is the conventional boasting and gloating over the achievement in the song of triumph in which she leads the people.

On the whole, it is remarkable that stories of vengeance, such as those of Esther and Judith, can be told with an appeal for all time. The key to the achievement, no doubt, lies in the majesty of character displayed by the heroines, and in the absolute disinterestedness of their motives. They regard themselves as tools for the execution of a righteous end, and having made up their minds they go forward with an unswerving purpose that forces admiration; and they risk their lives without any regretful looking back.

Judith's purity of motive, and true womanliness, are so obvious, that her grim triumph has, we feel, even fittingly been the subject of beautiful and joyous art.

CHAPTER III

POETRY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE stories of the Old Testament illustrate several poetic qualities in Hebrew prose, for the Hebrews were a very poetic people. They were masters of beautiful similes and could create lovely pictures clothed in imaginative language. Our Authorised Version has many words and phrases full of poetry, and though the translators' genius is shown in these, they are often close translations of the original words. Such lovely words, for example, as 'broken-hearted,' 'long-suffering,' 'tender-mercy' 'loving-kindness,' we owe to the Bible; and such lovely similes as are contained in the verse: 'He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth' – beautiful similes which appealed particularly to a people in a country which often suffered from drought. But besides poetic imagery and language, there is a great deal of actual poetry in form, in the Bible, and there are references here and there to books of poems which have been lost, so that there was no doubt a great deal more than we now have.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Verse was a very natural form of expression for the Hebrew people. The ancient Hebrew was intensely interested in himself and his nation; he had the strong passions of an Eastern people, and he expressed them easily and spontaneously. A great deal of his poetry, therefore, is, as we should expect, what is known as 'lyric poetry,' that is to say, short poems, giving expression to the writer's own feelings, but speaking to and for all of us, because man's emotions have changed but little through the ages. Confidence and trust in the face of life's problems on the one hand, loneliness and despair on the other, these are felt by all at some time, and the poet who can clothe them in sublime poetry has a permanent appeal.

Before considering the subject-matter, however, we must find out how it is that the Hebrew writer turns so easily from prose to verse, so that we often find verse embedded in a prose passage, because for the moment verse is more effective. A good example of this is found in the story of Balaam, which is in prose, but the blessings he utters with a passion he cannot control, are in verse. The reason for this easy change from one to the other is to be found in the *flexibility* of Hebrew versification. While our verse depends often on rhyme and on a carefully measured rhythm, Hebrew verse depends solely on the 'rhyme of thought,' or, to give it its proper name, on 'parallelism.' That is to say, the idea in one line depends

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

in some way on the idea in another. How it does so is seen best by examples.

‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof,
The world and they that dwell therein.’

These two lines express the same idea in different words, and hence this is known as *synonymous parallelism*.

Here is a verse where the lines express a *contrast*:

‘Except the Lord build the house,
They labour but in vain that build it.’

Or again:

‘I am for peace
But when I speak, they are for war.’

These examples are in the form known as *antithetical parallelism*.

In another kind, the second line gives a reason for the statement in the first line, and this is called constructive or *synthetic* – that is, ‘building-up’ – parallelism. For example:

‘Answer not a fool according to his folly,
(reason) Lest thou also be like unto him.’

In another form of constructive parallelism one

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

line illustrates the other by 'introducing' a comparison or *emblem*. Hence this is called *emblematic* parallelism. The emblem may occur in the first line, as in the following case:

(Emblem) 'As the eyes of a maiden unto the hand
of her mistress,
So our eyes look unto the Lord, our
God.'

In one more, rather rare and beautiful kind, a thought or form of expression in one line is taken up in the second line and repeated, before the *climax* is reached:

'For lo, thine enemies, O Lord!
For lo, thine enemies shall perish.'

This is called *climactic* parallelism.

When once the main principles of versification are grasped, it is easy to multiply examples, and to find, too, all sorts of variations. Three parallel lines occur together, or four-lined verses with the lines arranged in different ways.

In our literature, one form of verse having been chosen for a poem, it is usually kept to, but various forms are often found in one Hebrew poem. By way of illustration, Psalm cxliii will serve. The four phrases of the opening are in synonymous

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

parallelism, forming, as it were, one verse, with four lines, 'rhyming' in couples (*a a, b b*):

'Hear my prayer, O Lord, (*a*)
Give ear to my supplications, (*a*)
In Thy faithfulness answer me, (*b*)
And in thy righteousness.' (*b*)

Verse 8, again, contains four lines, this time in *synthetic* parallelism, 'rhyming' alternately (*a b, a b*):

'Cause me to hear thy loving-kindness
in the morning (*a*)
(reason) For in thee do I trust. (*b*)
'Cause me to know the way wherein
I should walk (*a*)
(reason) For I lift up my soul unto thee.' (*b*)

This form may be compared with the familiar form used in Gray's *Elegy*, where alternate lines rhyme in four-lined verses:

'Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's
shade, (*a*)
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering
heap (*b*)
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid, (*a*)
'The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.' (*b*)

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Two verses further on, in verse 10 of the Psalm, we get another variation, resembling in a superficial sense the form used by Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. The rhyming is *a b, b a*.

‘Teach me to do Thy will, (*a*)
For Thou art my God. (*b*)
Thy spirit is good, (*b*)
Lead me in the land of uprightness’ (*a*).

and from *In Memoriam*:

‘Thou wilt not leave us in the dust : (*a*)
Thou madest man, he knows not why, (*b*)
He thinks he was not made to die; (*b*)
And Thou hast made him; Thou are just.’ (*a*)

Sometimes in Hebrew poetry five lines are grouped together; sometimes six are needed to work out a thought; while various devices are employed to give coherence to the theme of a poem. These can be best illustrated from the Psalms, which are the most advanced and highly-wrought poems in Hebrew literature. A single line at the beginning or at the end of a poem, not parallel with another, may emphasise and drive home the main thought of the whole, while occasionally couplets or triplets are introduced for the same purpose.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Psalm xv, a fine little poem on right conduct, opens with a question in couplet form:

‘Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?
Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?’

The second, third and fourth verses, and part of the fifth, give the answer to this question – for it is only one question in synonymous parallelism – and then comes the single line summing up the conclusion:

‘He that doeth these things shall never be moved.’

To round off a poem, the beginning and end may be alike, as in Psalm viii where we get repeated:

‘O Lord our Lord, how excellent is Thy name
in all the earth!’

or a chorus may be used, reminding us that the Psalms were hymns to be sung in the Temple services. Thus:

‘The Lord of Hosts is with us;
The God of Jacob is our refuge’

marks the close of each section (or stanza) in Psalm xlvii.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

It is worth exploring a little further into the form of the Hebrew lyrics in order to realise what an art of hymn-writing had been developed and what possibilities of *form* there were in this 'rhyming of thought,' for form is not as a rule a marked quality of the literature we are studying. In this it is a contrast to the other great literatures which have survived from antiquity, the Greek and the Roman, which excelled in form. In some of the later Psalms, the elaboration of structure is such as to render them highly artificial and deprive them of the spontaneity which is essential to true lyric poetry. They were suited to the purpose for which they were written, for ceremonial usage in the Temple, but the personal appeal disappears. As an example we may consider Psalm cxiv. The different sections, or stanzas form a 'rhyme of thought,' just as single lines do with one another; that is to say, one whole stanza 'replies' by contrast to a thought in a previous stanza. In Psalm cxiv there are four stanzas. The first and last provide a setting for the two central ones which are closely related in form and content:

First stanza (a) –

'When Israel went forth out of Egypt,
The house of Jacob from a people of strange
language;
Judah was his sanctuary,
And Israel his dominion.'

Second stanza (b) –

‘The sea saw it, and fled;
Jordan was driven back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
And the little hills like young sheep.’

Third stanza (b) –

‘What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou
fleddest?
Thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back?
Ye mountains, that ye skipped like rams;
And ye little hills, like lambs?’

Fourth stanza (a) –

‘Tremble, thou earth, at the presence of the
Lord,
At the presence of the God of Jacob;
Which turned the rock into a standing water,
The flint into a fountain of waters.’ (A.V.)

Enough has been said to illustrate the principles, the flexibility, and the wide adaptability of the forms of Hebrew verse. We can now turn to examine the kinds of poetry to be found in the literature. That it is largely lyric poetry is to be expected from the temperament of the Hebrew people, but within this class there are several varieties of poems, and there is at least one which is peculiar to the poetry of the Bible – the ‘lyric of blessing’ or last words. Many poets

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

have said farewell in verse; many poems have for subject the parting of friends or lovers; but the consecration of a lyric form to the invocation of a divine blessing on one who is departing is unique. Gracious and mellow little poems result, for the feelings appealed to are common to all men at all times, and the sincerity of emotion is reinforced by religious feeling. Here is a very familiar example, somehow suggestive of quiet sunsets:

‘The Lord bless thee and keep thee,
The Lord make His face to shine upon thee,
and be gracious unto thee.
The Lord lift up the light of His countenance
upon thee,
And give thee peace.’

Another expression of feeling which appeals to all, is the lament of personal grief over the loss by death of a loved one. This is called the elegy.

Here is no case of a new kind of poem. Lamentation in verse is one of the earliest of all forms of poetry, and the lament – as, for example, that of David for Saul and Jonathan – speaks to all time for human reasons easy to realise. As in the case of the ‘lyric of blessing,’ the outstanding feature of this personal Hebrew elegy is its sincerity. It is direct in its approach, and it is poured out by one who mourns for someone loved personally.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Having in mind *Lycidas* and *Adonais* to go no further, it is not possible to say that personal sorrow is essential to the production of a fine elegy, but that it gives a poignant quality lacking in the more highly wrought poems is undeniable. David's grief in his lament is untinged by any sophistication, intellectual or religious. It is poured out straight from his heart, as he remembers the outstanding characteristics of the two who are slain. He recalls how they had done everything together; how they had excelled in physical prowess; the splendour of Saul's liberality; Jonathan's exceeding great love for him; the bitter thought of how the enemies of Israel will rejoice at their death; and the contrast between their greatness and their fall.

'Thy glory, O Israel, is slain upon thy high places!

How are the mighty fallen.

Tell it not in Gath,

Publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon,

.

'Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives,

And in their death they were not divided;

They were swifter than eagles,

They were stronger than lions.

Ye daughters of Israel weep over Saul,

Who clothed you in scarlet delicately,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Who put ornaments of gold upon your
apparel.

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the
battle!

Jonathan is slain upon thy high places.

I am distressed for thee my brother Jonathan:

Very pleasant hast thou been unto me:

Thy love to me was wonderful,

Passing the love of women.

How are the mighty fallen,

And the weapons of war perished!

2 Samuel i, 19 ff. (R.V.).

There were, doubtless, many such elegies in Hebrew poetry, some of them much less spontaneous, sung by professional mourners at the funerals. It is interesting to set beside the ancient elegies the words of a rhythmic lament, still chanted in unison by large congregations at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem – a lament that has been handed down for centuries from father to son:¹

(response) ‘For the palace that lies desolate,
 We sit in solitude and mourn.

.

(response) ‘For our majesty that is departed,
 We sit in solitude and mourn.

¹ Quoted in *The Times* of 26th August 1929, and taken from a translation of Mr Ormsby Gore.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘For our great men who lie dead,
(response) We sit in solitude and mourn,’

and so on through a succession of verses.

The survival of David's lament is no doubt due to association with his name, while others less famous were removed from the accepted canon and lost sight of. A development of the elegy, however, does survive from days of later history, when the form was used to express the general grief of the people over the nation's downfall. Such an elegy is the book of *The Lamentations of Jeremiah*. The opening is in the familiar form:

‘How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of
people!

How is she become as a widow!

She that was great among the nations and
princess among the provinces,

How is she become tributary!’

Lamentations i, 1 ff. (R.V.).

The whole is a lament for glory departed, and a terrible picture of the affliction that has come upon Zion as a direct result of her sins. The punishment is recognised as just, and the elegy, gloomy though it is, is full of religious earnestness, unlike the pagan lament previously examined. Faith in God's mercies is affirmed in a well-known passage that stands out from the gloomy picture:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not
consumed, because his compassions fail not.
They are new every morning; great is thy
faithfulness,
The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore
will I hope in Him.

· · · · · · · ·
For the Lord will not cast off for ever,
For though He cause grief, yet will He have
compassion according to the multitude of
His mercies,
For He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve
the children of men.’

Lamentations, iii, 22 ff. (R.V.).

While the emotions roused by death are the earliest to find rhythmic expression among a people, another common form of poem in early literature is the song of thanksgiving after some individual or national triumph. Samson sings a little song of triumph after his victory over the Philistines:

‘With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps,
With the jawbone of an ass, have I smitten a
thousand men!’

Deborah and Barak sang a song of national triumph to celebrate the victory of the children of Israel over the Canaanites (Judges v). It is a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

fierce, vindictive chant, and the end, which describes the murder of Sisera, and his mother awaiting his return in vain, is bitter indeed. That the individual who has actually done the murder should so gloat over it is repulsive to our taste. An earlier song of triumph is less repulsive because more general. It celebrates the escape of the whole nation, through the overthrow of the forces of the pursuing Egyptians, and is that sung by Moses, with the concluding response sung by Miriam, accompanied by a band of women with timbrels and dancing. It has a 'swing' about it, as a few verses will show:

'I will sing unto the Lord, for He has triumphed
gloriously.

The horse and his rider hath He thrown into
the sea.

The Lord is my strength and song.

And He is become my salvation:

This is my God and I will praise Him,
My father's God, and I will exalt Him.

.

'The enemy said,

I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the
spoil:

.

'Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea
covered them;

They sank as lead in the mighty waters.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the
Gods?

Who is like Thee glorious in holiness?

Fearful in praises, doing wonders?

Exodus xv, 1 ff. (R.V.).

Two features in this song are specially characteristic. One is the Hebrew fondness for concrete imagery; the other, the explanation of natural phenomena as the immediate result of God's direction, which here is made to subserve national ends. The phenomenon of the holding back of the Red Sea as the Israelites passed over, may be accounted for naturally. To the Hebrew it was the direct intervention of God whose right hand dashed the enemy in pieces that Israel might triumph, and the blast of whose nostrils, in the figurative language employed, 'piled up the waters.' The sea overwhelmed the Egyptians because God 'blew with his wind.' We may remember that these words were borrowed from this song in 1588 by Queen Elizabeth for the medal cast to celebrate the scattering of the Spanish Armada and our own national triumph. The tendency to revert to a purely national outlook in the attitude towards the Deity reappears in all nations even to-day in time of war.

The greatest contribution of the Hebrew people to world poetry is, of course, to be found in the Psalms. We have them now in one book, and they

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

are the 'world's oldest hymn-book.' Their composition extended over hundreds of years of eventful history, and they give expression over that period to the highest religious experience, national and individual, of a deeply religious people. They offer varied examples of the religious lyric. Some of them were written, as we have noticed, for ceremonial, congregational worship in the Temple, and deal lyrically or emotionally with some event in Hebrew history. Of these some tell, in what often seems to us to-day rather terrible language, of national triumphs; others lament national disaster. Some of them are purely individual, and these express mainly, either rejoicing in God's protection and aid as a guide through life, or are a record of human error, of sorrow and suffering, through which trust in God has been a consolation and support. Into a few there creeps a note of doubt. Of a different character and very beautiful and poetic are those which we may describe as *nature psalms*; and as a final group in this classification, rough but sufficient for our purpose, are Psalms which contain similar reflections on life and morals, to those which we find in the writings of the 'wise men,' reviewed in Chapter V.

The Psalms with the least appeal to us to-day are naturally those written with the special circumstances of Hebrew history in mind. They are among the most ceremonial and artificial and appeal less for this reason also, and over those

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

which retail the facts of Jewish history we need not linger. Some of the 'national' Psalms, however, have a universal and perpetual appeal, for what the Jews experienced in exile, the exiled and homesick feel in all ages. One need not actually belong to a defeated nation to be deeply moved by the opening verses of that majestic and musical lament from Babylon:

'By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst thereof
We hanged up our harps.
For there they that led us captive required of us
songs;
And they that wasted us required of us mirth,
saying,
Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
How shall we sing the Lord's song,
In a strange land?
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget her cunning.
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth;
If I remember thee not;
If I prefer not Jerusalem
Above my chief joy.'

Psalm cxxxvii (R.V.).

Very majestic also are some of the purely ritual

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Psalms, through the words of which a thunder of chorus music rolls and echoes. Such is the last Psalm, cl:

‘Praise ye the Lord.

Praise God in His sanctuary:

Praise Him in the firmament of His power.

Praise Him for His mighty acts:

Praise Him according to His excellent greatness.

Praise Him with the sound of the trumpet:

Praise Him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise Him with the timbrel and dance:

Praise Him with stringed instruments and the pipe.

Praise Him upon the loud cymbals;

Praise Him upon the high-sounding cymbals.

Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.

Praise ye the Lord.’ (R.V.)

It is inevitable that the literature of a people whose history was as tragic as that of the Jewish nation should be largely preoccupied with the emotions roused by suffering. These emotions lend themselves particularly to lyric expression. Joy is a rarer poetic mood, more difficult to catch, and more easily spoiled by reflection. Many of the Psalms, therefore, tell of personal sorrow and despair, sometimes due directly to the national sufferings, often individual, and at times the result of acknowledged wrong-doing. They appeal to

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

God to deliver the soul of the petitioner from the depths that threaten to engulf him; to preserve him from the foes who surround him and desire his downfall; or to save him from his own sin – and they nearly always end on a note of trust and confidence in the justice of God's dealings with men and nations; in His support of the righteous and the repentant; and in His condemnation of the wicked. This is the most common of the feelings expressed. The Psalms express emotionally the belief in the just ruling of the world, by the one true God, which is one of the great contributions of Hebrew thought to mankind's moral and religious progress.

The longing of the suffering soul for God, and the certainty that He will bring deliverance, is worked out in different ways, in many of the most familiar Psalms; and similes and imagery from them have passed into the language:

‘As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after Thee, O God ’

is a simile which opens a favourite hymn of modern times. ‘Deep calleth unto deep,’ is a majestic personification in the same Psalm. Out of any of these poignant laments come phrases which speak to the heart, having acquired an emotional content from their aptness as well as from their familiarity. Here are a few: ‘Bowed down to the dust’; ‘The

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

oil of gladness'; 'A very present help in trouble'; 'The bread of tears'; 'Into deep waters'; 'As a tale that is told.'

The change of mood from despair to trust is perhaps what most distinguishes these lyrics from lyrics of other literatures – for a lyric is generally the concentrated expression of *one* ephemeral mood. In a few of the Psalms the mood of doubt and questioning has crept in and predominates throughout. They do not dwell on personal suffering, but on the problem which, we shall see, troubled Job and Ecclesiastes – the mystery of the prosperity of the wicked, and the trials of the righteous. In these Psalms, known mainly as the Psalms of Asaph, and coming as their contents show from the most bitter times of Jewish history, the conclusion seems to be introduced almost in spite of the writer's keen perception of the overwhelming appearances against it, and as a concession to the conventional form of these laments.

'Surely God is good to Israel,'

one begins,

'Even to such as are pure in heart.'

It *must* be so, in spite of appearances:

'But as for me, my feet were almost gone,
My steps had well-nigh slipped.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

For I was envious at the arrogant
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.'
Psalm lxxiii, 2, 3 (R.V.).

Another, Psalm lxxiv, calls upon God:

'Arise, O God, plead Thine own cause:
Remember how the foolish man reproacheth
Thee all the day.

.

The tumult of those that rise up against Thee
ascendeth continually.'

And on this note the Psalm abruptly ends. This troubled spirit is not far off from the questionings of Job, and the surrendering of a theory which could not be made to fit the facts of life. Into the problems raised by this theory inquiry will be made later on.

A number of the Psalms do not deal with any deep emotion, and touch on no abstract problem. Some are straightforward reflections on life and morals, put together to form short poems or 'hymns' on one particular theme. Others give advice as to conduct, and from their subject matter they belong to the 'wisdom' literature already referred to, but they are distinguished from it in that they never descend to the *merely* prudent. Of the former type, consisting of elevated general reflections on a desirable way of life, Psalm xv,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

already quoted, is one of the finest examples, and is a complete, well-rounded-off little poem.

It is a short manual of reliability and straight dealing, intensely practical in the advice given, but sublime in its conception of the demands made upon one who would be accounted worthy to 'walk with God.' Such a man must not merely speak verbal truth, but speak it 'in his heart.' If he has given an undertaking, and finds it to his disadvantage to keep it, he must not make excuses and try to evade it. The passing on of tales calculated to harm others must be scrupulously avoided. Here is a practical standard of moral attainment not easily surpassed, and, it must be admitted, even to-day rare of achievement!

The whole of the long and – in form – artificial Psalm cxix is a series of precepts for good conduct, more spiritual than much of the 'wisdom' literature with which by its subject, it, and one or two other Psalms, may be classified. It is with the writers of the Psalms as poets, however, rather than as moralists, that we are at the moment chiefly interested, and while, in the examination of his writings, the poet's attitude to life is of primary interest, another question to which we must pass on is his attitude to nature.

The Hebrews were an out-of-doors people, living very close to nature, and they very rapidly translated experience into poetic and dramatic symbols; but they did not approach nature in a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

disinterested spirit. They came to her with the presupposition that all that happened was due to the direct working of God. Thus their monotheism blocked their way to any impartial curiosity. Nature, to them, was in immediate and continual dependence on its creator. External events were accepted and explained in the light of this predominant belief, and in its light any scientific approach to natural problems was ruled out. We have seen something of this in examining the story of the creation. It may be illustrated again from the Psalms. The Hebrew poet drew a faithful and direct picture of nature as he saw it ('her' would be a term he would not think of using) and he saw every event as the result of God's intervention.

In one great 'nature Psalm,' Psalm civ, the whole universe is passed by the poet under review: the heavens; the motions of sun and moon; the earth – mountains, valleys, and rivers; man, and the beasts of the field with appointed seasons for all their activities – and God's direct working is seen in all. The light is His garment; the clouds His chariot, the winds His messengers; the waters flee at His rebuke and the thunder is His voice; the beasts of sea and land depend on Him; His touch causes the mountains to smoke:

'O Lord, how manifold are Thy works!'

exclaims the singer,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘In wisdom hast Thou made them all.’

It is not a contradiction of this view to add that the Hebrew view of nature was, in a sense, anthropomorphic. This has, in fact, already been illustrated in the human terms used to describe the different aspects of nature. More direct still is such a comparison as that which describes the sun, ‘as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, And rejoicing as a strong man to run his course! The valleys, covered with corn, ‘shout for joy, they also sing.’ Nature shares with man in the joy and marvels of creation. Such anthropomorphism is inevitable in the childhood of a race, a period when pure description is as impossible as it is to a child.

It is not a far step from this, to viewing nature as actually sharing in, and sympathising with, man’s joys and sorrows – to indulging in the ‘pathetic fallacy,’ as Ruskin called it; but that step the Hebrew poet does not take; and while nature is conceived as rejoicing, there is no case in the Psalms where it is conceived of as sorrowing. It is to God, and the joy of creation that it is related, not to man and his troubles. For this reason, among others, the modern poet’s idea of nature as cruel has no possible place in the Hebrew poet’s conception. The view of a direct and finished creation shuts out also any ideas of progress and development. Nature to the Hebrew

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

is the very type of permanence – God has set ‘the foundations of the earth’ so sure ‘that it should not be moved for ever.’ ‘The everlasting hills’ are typical of a safe refuge and enduring strength – those very hills that Tennyson saw as types of impermanence to the longer vision, when he cried, ‘Like clouds they shape themselves and go.’

The Hebrew poet’s view of nature, in short, is simple, direct, and instinctive. The most obvious is what strikes him – vast expanses and great movements. He revels in the grandeur and the clash; in the God who ‘maketh winds his messengers, His ministers a flaming fire.’ Where sound is noticed, it is its grandeur and not its beauty that attracts attention – the floods lifting up their voice, the crash of thunder, the roaring of the beasts of prey. Appreciation of such a detail as the beauty of the lilies of the field belongs to a much later period in Jewish history.

The references to nature throughout the Psalms throw many sidelights on the nature of the life led by the writers and the country they lived in. It was a country where man’s defences against nature were barely secure – poisonous snakes, and lions were living dangers. Drought was at times a scourge: ‘They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way: they found no city of habitation,’ is a description of physical as well as of spiritual desolation.

The blessing of the rain or dew, and of the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

water-springs turning 'the wilderness into a pool of water,' provide the Psalms with some of their most beautiful metaphors. The protection afforded by the hills, or by the shadow of a rock in the heat of the day emphasise the suffering from lack of shelter in the desert. A 'burning wind' is to be part of the portion of the wicked.

A special reference to those Psalms which have the most enduring appeal has been left to the end. They are those which dwell most intimately on the writer's personal relations to his Maker. Some, as has been noticed in passing, reveal doubt turning into trust. Some are songs of pure rejoicing, and praise to God for His goodness. Some tell of a sense of quiet strength felt by the writer in all difficulties and through seeming defeat, because of confidence in God. Such a resting-place for the soul is one which has been described as the most beautiful religious poem in any literature – the twenty-third Psalm:

'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for
His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence
of mine enemies:

Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup
runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life:

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord for
ever.' (R.V.)

Other Psalms express the same certitude and
trust, but none is more perfect or more entirely
satisfying.

CHAPTER IV

LOVE POETRY: THE SONG OF SONGS

A STUDY of the lyric poetry of the Old Testament would be incomplete without examination of a book of a character unique in Hebrew literature. The Song of Solomon, or the Song of Songs, as it is called from its opening words, is the one surviving example of pure love poetry in that literature. The phrase, 'song of songs,' is superlative, and few will think the superlative is undeserved.

As a love poem, or a series of love poems, the book contradicts many of the theories about the religious fervour and goal of all Hebrew writing. It is entirely non-religious. Its delicacy and beauty, its depiction of steadfast affection make it truly moral, but that is a different issue.

The attempt to regard it as a piece of religious writing, which was persisted in, generally speaking, from the first to the eighteenth century, for long hindered its proper appreciation as literature. As the chapter headings in the Authorised Version show, it was taken as an allegory, and the obvious meaning of every chapter was wrested to suit the allegorical interpretation. If it were an allegory it

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

would be a very poor one, and would be open to serious criticism for lack of clearness, and for the fact that there is no need to go beyond the surface meaning for its full enjoyment. It is, however, the beautiful expression of a pure and passionate love.

When the obstacle of allegorical interpretation has been removed, though the way is cleared for enjoyment, the difficulties are not at an end, and many theories have been put forward as to the exact form of the book. Was it written as one dramatic poem? Is it a collection of love songs unified into some degree of drama, by one editor? Is it a collection of love songs to be regarded as separate lyrics, gathered together into one book? There have been advocates in the last one and a half centuries of all these theories.

If it is in dramatic form, is the whole a dialogue, as between Solomon and the Shulamite, with the background of a sort of Greek chorus of Court women? Or are there the Chorus and three characters: Solomon, the Shulamite, and the shepherd lover? Again, there have been advocates of both these theories.

While remembering that many learned critics of recent years have been convinced by the discoveries of Wetzstein, Prussian Consul at Damascus, that the book is simply a collection of marriage songs such as have been sung at Syrian weddings through the centuries, we shall in our study first follow the dramatic interpretation, largely favoured

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

by critics through the nineteenth century. In any case, it seems likely that the whole collection was edited by one hand, and that the editor consciously tried to unify the whole, and so to arrange the poems that they lead up to a dramatic *dénouement*, and the dramatic interpretation has two virtues. It adds the interest of character to the interest of the book as a whole, and in spite of unsolved difficulties – which, be it noted, exist with either interpretation – it is very illuminating. The interpretation we shall first follow, then, is that accepted by Ewald, and after him, among other critics, by Robertson Smith, who worked out the drama with three characters playing their parts.

The theme of the drama as thus conceived is the triumph of steadfast love. The clash of conflicting passions provides the dramatic motive. The scene opens with the heroine, the Shulamite, a virtual prisoner in the royal palace, whither she has been brought by Solomon to become a member of his harem. He has, as we gather later, been overcome by her beauty, when he and his train, out on a hunting expedition, surprised her in a garden. But she is betrothed to, and loves a shepherd of her own station, and to him she remains faithful. Her first words give expression to that faithfulness. The king has brought her to his chambers, but she turns to memories of her country home. There she cries, in pathetic lament, she had been ‘keeper of the vineyards: but mine own vineyard have I not

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

kept. Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon.'

At this stage there comes in the Chorus of the Daughters of Jerusalem, which we may compare roughly with the Chorus in Greek drama. They cannot be said to provide a commentary on the action, but their final change of attitude marks the victory of the Shulamite's faithfulness. They now tell the Shulamite mockingly that if she feels thus (in their view foolishly) she had better go out and follow a flock and feed her kids 'beside the shepherds' tents.'

Solomon then takes up the thread with a song in praise of the maiden, which is a great deal more cumbrous than her flute-like singing. Its imagery is concrete and material, and it is quite in character that he should think in terms of chariots and horses, and gold and silver ornaments; rather conventionally he compares her eyes to doves' eyes. Later on he is to realise that they are by no means to be dismissed in conventional terms. The Shulamite's similes, on the other hand, are almost all from nature – trees and flowers and fruit and sweet-smelling herbs. She replies to his praises with more praise of her lover and profession of her single-minded devotion, and a sentence by the Chorus closes this section.

In the next round, or act, if we follow Ewald – the shepherd is introduced in a dialogue within

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the dialogue. His is the ecstatic description of the coming of spring, familiarity with which can never stale it:

‘Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away,
For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and
gone;

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the
singing of birds is come, and the voice of the
turtle is heard in our land.

The fig-tree putteth forth her green figs and the
vines with the tender grape, give a good
smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come
away.’

Song of Solomon, ii, 11-13 (A.V.).

Is there a more light and lovely expression of the call of spring in all literature?

The return to the main dialogue is made with a description of a vain search for the beloved, ending with the choral refrain as before, the Chorus still being simply non-committal, and then (in Act iii) Solomon, with his train of three-score valiant men, armed and empanoplied, returns to the wooing. According to the dramatic theory of three characters, Solomon and the Shepherd take part in turn. Once more, Solomon's love-making is somewhat heavy and unconvincing. ‘Thy hair is like a flock of goats’; ‘Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are ever shorn, which came up from the washing.’ It is almost as if he were trying to

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

please her by talking her pastoral language and only succeeding in being clumsy and strained in his efforts. The end of his speech: 'Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee,' where there is no attempt at simile, is much more natural, but we do not wonder that the Shepherd, with his straightforward and sincere passion, prevails.

'Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my bride.

Thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.

How fair is thy love, my sister, my bride!

How much better is thy love than wine!

And the smell of thine ointments than all manner of spices!'

His image of her as a garden full of spices, is taken up in her reply. She invites him to enter and he responds with a joyful description of acceptance. The Shulamite's account of a horrible dream of a vain search for her lover at last rouses the interest of the Chorus, and they ask her to describe the charms which have so bewitched her. If the lyric sung in reply is a conventional marriage song – and there is frequent repetition of metaphors in the songs – to readers who do not know those usually sung, it rings fresh and true, both in its developed similes and in the simplicity of its last verse:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘His mouth is most sweet: yea he is altogether lovely.

This is my beloved and this is my friend,
O daughter of Jerusalem.’

The chorus of women is now thoroughly interested.

‘Whither,’ they ask, ‘is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? Whither hath thy beloved turned him, that we may seek him with thee?’

Her reply is broken into by Solomon. Many of the similes are the same as in previous songs, but there is a change. This wooing is less confident. There is awe in it. He describes her now as ‘terrible as an army with banners,’ and begs her ‘turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me.’

The Shulamite does not reply, but explains, in reminiscence, how she was trapped in the garden of nuts.

Solomon’s last lyric leads up to a monologue by the Shulamite full of tenderness and maidenly diffidence, and the fourth act is closed by the question of the Chorus:

‘Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness,
Leaning upon her beloved?’

Her steadfastness and loyalty have conquered, and she has found and returned in freedom to her

shepherd lover. After a song expressive of some natural diffidence, she cries to him in final surrender in words of the most passionate conviction:

‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon
thine arm;

For love is strong as death.

Jealousy is cruel as the grave:

‘The flashes thereof are flashes of fire,

A very flame of the Lord.

Many waters cannot quench love,

Neither can the floods drown it:

If a man would give all the substance of his
house for love,

He would utterly be contemned.’

Song of Solomon, viii, 6, 7 (R.V.).

and the *dénouement* leaves the two together.

It is obvious that the dramatic theory is very carefully worked out, and that it can be used, without overstraining, to explain and illuminate very much of the book as a whole. Nevertheless, many recent critics have been convinced that the theory which views the book as an anthology is the correct one. In favour of the dramatic theory are such points as the consistency of the characters throughout, which we have noticed in analysing the book from that standpoint. The frequent repetition of similes and phrases is not so convincing, for the songs may be conventional

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

variations on a conventional theme, and may come from a common group-origin in a limited geographical area, and would therefore naturally have a strong family resemblance. Recent discovery has shown that to-day, as for centuries, the Syrian peasant celebrates the marriage feast for seven days. The bride and bridegroom act king and queen, and on the day after the wedding, seated on a throne made of the threshing-board, they listen to such songs as those which make up the Song of Songs, while the bridesmen play the part of the guard of Solomon in the Song. They, and other villagers, sing songs descriptive of the beauties of the newly wedded pair, and of the joys of love, and the bride sings a song in praise of the bridegroom, such as that in the Song of Songs beginning:

‘My beloved is white and ruddy,
The chiefest among ten thousand.’

(v, 10 ff.)

A song sung during a dance by the bride might well open:

‘How beautiful are thy feet in sandals, O Prince’s
daughter,’

and others in her praise may be composed as if by the bridegroom or assigned to him for dramatic purposes.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

When once we have obtained a grasp of the poem, by analysis along the lines of one of the above theories, either is seen to be capable of acceptance on the surface, and the dramatic theory is worth working out for the light it throws on the possibilities of drama inherent in the marriage customs. The poems fit in so well with the suggested action that we must conclude that the editor who arranged the book had these possibilities in view, and so arranged the songs as to give them some sort of unity to lead up to a dramatic close. Having said this, we must admit that historical investigation points to the anthology theory of the book's origin being the correct one, though in it also there remain unsolved problems.¹ Critics who have accepted this theory have distinguished as many as twenty-three separate songs in the collection. Whether we are regarding them as a whole or not, we may justifiably consider the characteristics they have in common; for in any case they have a common purpose and are the folk-songs of one people.

First, in spite of conventional touches, we would pick out the freshness of the approach to nature, particularly in those songs which in the dramatic interpretation are assigned to the Shulamite. They have on them the dew of early morning in the open fields in spring. The grass is green; the rose

¹ For fuller treatment of the different theories see article, *Ency. Brit.*, under 'Canticles.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and the lily of the valley are in bloom; the aromas of garden herbs and of cedar and fir on the mountain fill the air; the shepherd leads out his flock and makes it rest at noonday; his beauty is compared with that of a roe or a young hart – graceful and joyous; their pleasure is to ‘get up early to the vineyards’ to ‘see if the vine flourish – whether the tender grape appear and the pomegranates bud forth.’

How those who could compose and find enjoyment in singing such songs, must have loved their familiar country and delighted in the changing seasons. There is a sense of possession by right of appreciation, which only comes with long intimacy, in the singling out of ‘the apple-tree among the trees of the wood’ as a favourite. The number of times that scent is mentioned as something which delights, is remarkable. Ointments which have a goodly fragrance are included, but nearly all the scents noticed are the fragrances of plants: spikenard; saffron; a bundle of myrrh; aloes; a cluster of henna flowers; camphire; calamus, and cinnamon, ‘with all trees of frankincense’; mandrakes, and in an all-embrasive phrase, ‘the mountains of spices.’ Even the garments have an out-of-door scent, ‘like the smell of Lebanon.’

There is no subtlety about the attitude to nature. The approach is straightforward; but there is joyous abandonment to the pleasures of the senses

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

in open-air delights. Many of the metaphors and similes are drawn from wild nature. The dove, the 'little foxes that spoil the vines,' roes, harts, and hinds all afford comparisons, sometimes often repeated. The honeycomb, streams from Lebanon, the winds – all these are used figuratively. The strongest things conceivable – next to love – are natural forces:

'Love is strong as death,'

and

'Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it.'

Dwellers in a hot land, where rocks and trees cast deep shadows, coined the deliciously restful phrase:

'Until the day be cool, and the shadows flee
away.' (R.V.)

As we have noticed, the songs assigned to the King have not this same freshness of approach. They are more sophisticated, less joyful, and less beautiful. Their metaphors, too, are largely taken from nature, but the singer is heavy-handed, and their development is not always felicitous. Hair 'like a flock of goats,' and a neck 'like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

men,' are compliments which do not sound very pleasing to modern taste, and it is a curious comparison to compare a maiden with towns – Tirzah and Jerusalem – in comeliness.

As a whole, however, the imagery is remarkable for its delicacy and its picturesqueness. There is blessing in such comments as: 'Thy name is as ointment poured forth,' and 'Then was I in his eyes as one that found peace.' 'He feedeth his flock among the lilies,' is a beautiful picture. 'His banner over me was love' is metaphor expressive of exultant trust.

Even if we reject the dramatic theory, and accept only that of some unifying hand, there is interesting use of contrast to heighten the effects in the poems. Differences between the songs ascribed to the King and to the Shulamite have been noticed. Another contrast is presented between the lyrics of praise and those describing failures to find the loved one. The diffidence and hesitation expressed in the song: 'O, that thou wert as my brother' heighten the confidence and certainty of the song of final surrender.

The exquisite poetry is preserved, if not increased, by the wonderful translation. The poets of the Elizabethan era were masters of love lyrics, and the translators of the Song of Songs, whether they lay claim to it or not, were poets of a high order. 'This is true, whether we consider details

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

like the use of vowels and alliteration in such a sentence as:

‘Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm,’

which only needs to be quoted for their skilful use to leap to the ear; or whether we enjoy as a whole the graceful rhythm of passage after passage.

If these songs are the product of folk-lore, and not of any individual genius, they are the most remarkable of testimonies to the poetic temperament of the Hebrew people. There has been much discussion as to the district in which the poems were produced. In spite of some indications to the contrary, such as the introduction of the Chorus of Ladies of Jerusalem, it is likely that the songs grew into shape among the people of the north. Lebanon, or places near it, are constantly referred to with evident familiarity, and the view from Hermon is one quoted as between those with a common knowledge. Scholars tell us that the language bears out the theory of a northern origin in about 300 B.C.

The songs give a wonderful picture of a passion, controlled yet absorbing; free and outspoken to a degree alien to Western feeling, yet of an innocence and purity that is unchallenged. The dramatic theory makes the whole poem turn on the heroine's constancy to her shepherd lover amid manifold

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

temptations; and in each song, as a unit, faithful love is put forward as the one ideal. Such love is depicted as a thing of joy and of incalculable worth.

In whatever particular region of Palestine the book was produced, as a unique and most beautiful expression in ancient Hebrew literature of the purest of love passions, its interest is unsurpassed.

CHAPTER V

THE 'WISE MEN' OF THE BOOK OF PROVERBS

IN the Psalms we have the most sublime expression of the passionate, religious fervour of the early Hebrews, but if that was all that survived of their literature, we should have had a very incomplete and one-sided picture of their temperament. The Book of Proverbs helps to complete the picture – by the revelation given of the practical, worldly-wise, and prudent side of their character. The 'wise men,' as the writers of the kind of literature in Proverbs were called, have been described as the 'humanists' among the Hebrews. Their writings consist of reflection on life and human affairs, largely untinged by national or strong religious feeling, and giving evidence of a certain width of outlook and experience.

As in the Psalms, the material put together in the Book of Proverbs is some of it of early origin, but in the form in which it survives to-day, it dates from a later period of Jewish history, after the Exile. When the books of the 'wise men' were put together, monotheism was so established that

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

there was no need to emphasise it, and the ritual law was equally accepted. Jewish scholars had come under the influence of Greek thought, and of the social amenities of a developed city life, and with this they had become interested students of a wider culture than their own.

The 'wisdom' which the 'wise men' advocated was the result of human reflection on the facts under their notice; and to the result of human reflection they entrusted the guidance of their affairs. Reason and conscience – and not inspiration – were their guides; but if it may be said that they summed up the philosophical thought of pre-Christian Judaism, it must be added that their thought was not *philosophical* in the modern sense. They entered upon no discussion of the basis of the morals they advocated, and they made no explorations into the origin of the facts they accepted. They accepted laws and customs as they found them, and they examined man's life to draw practical conclusions as to what was good and what bad, and why one should be pursued and the other avoided. At its highest they desired so to order life that the utmost possible good might be got out of it, and if material good was achieved they reasoned back to virtue; while, reversing the reasoning, they argued that if a man was virtuous, material prosperity would follow.

The problems raised by this reasoning must be returned to later, after a short consideration of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the form in which the 'wisdom' literature in the Book of Proverbs is written.

Generally speaking, the form is that of the Hebrew poetry, and the basis is the couplet, in synonymous or antithetic parallelism. For example:

‘He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty.

And he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.’

There the second line echoes the first, only making it a little more definite. In the following the lines are contrasted:

‘A wise son maketh a glad father,

But a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.’

These are single verse couplets, and have been given the name of Unit Proverbs, while the verse is described as *gnomic verse* – that is, verse which sets forth general maxims, or reflections, on life, in a short, pithy form.

Starting from the Unit Proverb the ‘wise men’ worked up their verse into varied forms. Sometimes a little explanation is added to the couplet either before or after it; sometimes a short poem is worked out, dealing with one subject only, with its form carefully limited, and we are told *how* it can be limited, in the opening verse. Here

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

is a poem we may describe as a sonnet, on the 'little but wise things of the earth.' From the first line it is laid down that it will deal with *four* things only:

'There be four things which are little upon the
earth,
But they are exceeding wise;
The ants are a people not strong,
Yet they provide their meat in the summer;
The conies are but a feeble folk,
Yet make they their houses in the rocks;
The locusts have no king,
Yet go they forth all of them by bands;
The lizard thou canst seize with thy hands,
Yet is she in kings' palaces.'

Proverbs xxx, 24-28 (R.V.)

There are three or four poems in Proverbs similar in form to this, and it is easy to find other examples of short poems in varying forms. One famous one is on the lazy man:

'Go to the ant, thou sluggard,
Consider her ways and be wise:
Which having no chief,
Overseer or ruler,
Provideth her meat in the summer,
And gathereth her food in the harvest.
How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard?

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?
Yet a little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to sleep:
So shall thy poverty come as a robber,
And thy want as an armèd man.'

Proverbs vi, 6-11 (R.V.).

Another, with the same moral and the same refrain, tells of a bad farmer who does not look after his land and so comes to poverty:

'I went by the field of the slothful,
And by the vineyard of the man void of understanding;
And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns,
The face thereof was covered with nettles,
And the stone wall thereof was broken down.
Then I beheld and considered well:
I saw, and received instruction.
Yet a little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to sleep:
So shall thy poverty come as a robber,
And thy want as an armèd man.'

Proverbs xxiv, 30-34 (R.V.).

One of the longer poems, also very well known, portrays the virtues of the writer's ideal woman:

'A virtuous woman, who can find?
For her price is far above rubies.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

She is reliable, industrious, prudent, charitable, wise, and kindly:

‘Strength and dignity are her clothing;
And she laugheth at the time to come.
She openeth her mouth with wisdom;
And the law of kindness is on her tongue.
She looketh well to the ways of her household,
And eateth not the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up, and call her blessed;
Her husband also, and he praiseth her, saying,
Many daughters have done virtuously,
But thou excellest them all.
Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain:
But a woman that feareth the Lord,
She shall be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands;
And let her own works praise her in the gates.’
Proverbs xxxi (R.V.).

It would be an interesting exercise to make a character study from Proverbs of the ‘wise men’s’ ideal *man*. We suspect that the result, curiously enough, would not be nearly as ‘perfectly’ ideal as the character which the male writer draws for his ideal woman. There would be a good deal more of everyday shrewdness in it, and the reasons which would emerge for his virtues would not be so disinterested! An interesting comparison, however, is the picture of ‘famous men’ in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (xliv, 1 ff.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

For the most part the Book of Proverbs does not consist of complete poems such as those quoted, but of a series of disconnected reflections on life, without any unifying subject. The first nine chapters are devoted mainly to the praise of wisdom, which, the 'wise men' taught, can, and should, be the guide of man through life. Sometimes in the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom appears as *mere prudence*, warning man of things harmful to his prosperity. Sometimes, however, it appears as that which is most worth attaining for its own sake, of all that this life has to offer. In its highest form it appears as a person, or *personified*, as that which, working with God through the ages, brings beauty and strength and delight into His creation. 'Happy is the man,' says the writer, 'that findeth wisdom':

'Happy is the man that findeth wisdom,
And the man that getteth understanding.
For the merchandise of it is better than the
merchandise of silver,
And the gain thereof than fine gold.
She is more precious than rubies:
And none of the things thou canst desire are to
be compared unto her.
Length of days is in her right hand;
In her left hand are riches and honour.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
And all her paths are peace.'

Proverbs iii, 13-17 (R.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Most of the rest of the book consists of disconnected proverbs, but though they have no coherence in one sense, they are connected by the practical utilitarian philosophy which comes out very clearly from them as a whole, and this brings us back to the subject-matter of Proverbs as distinct from the form. The 'wise men,' from the wealth of their shrewd and interested observations, gave plain straightforward advice about everyday problems – advice untouched by romance or any suspicion of poetic enthusiasms, but likely to be useful in ordinary affairs and in normal human relations. Their philosophy is always directly applicable to life, and their morality does not rise above what is likely to result in benefit. In one way they are more disinterested than most Hebrew writers. They are not violent nationalists or prejudiced religious partisans. They can praise an action for its own sake, and do not call on tradition or convention in framing their judgments. Their firm belief in the moral government of God is not bound up with any strong partisan feelings.

As interesting as any feature of their writings is the fact that their constant preoccupation with the life of the people, leads them indirectly to throw many sidelights on the habits, customs and ideals of the ancient Hebrews. The people depicted, living mainly in small cities, have a much more sophisticated attitude to nature than the poets who wrote the Psalms. The comparisons

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

with natural phenomena are, on the whole, conventional though appropriate, as for example:

‘The King’s wrath is as the roaring of a lion
But his favour is as dew upon the grass’ –

and most of them refer to domestic animals. The horse and the ass, the value of the ox are mentioned, and the need of diligent care for flocks and herds. The keeping of goats for their milk, the use of lambs’ wool for their clothing, the churning of butter and the cultivation of corn, the fig and the vine are evidently general. Honey and the honeycomb afford similes for that which is pleasant and desirable.

Mining is known and the purifying of silver from dross is mentioned. The manners and customs and the moral verdicts of the time are also illustrated. The sluggard comes in, as we have seen, for much condemnation; laziness in harvest is a sin in the primitive community:

‘He that sleepeth in harvest
Is a son that causeth shame.’

It would be hard to beat the sense of utter sloth conveyed by the couplet:

‘The sluggard burieth his hand in the dish;
It wearieth him to bring it again to his mouth.’

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

While the next couplet condemns intellectual laziness also:

‘The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit
Than seven men that can render a reason.’

The fool is someone to be avoided, quite as carefully as the knave:

‘Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man,
Rather than a fool in his folly.’

The extremity of the contrast is marked. Most people would, on the whole, rather risk the second alternative, but to the ‘wise men’ the fool was particularly abhorrent, and they saw no reason to suffer him gladly. Another comparison runs:

‘As a bag of gems in a heap of stones,
So is he that giveth honour to a fool.’

The community that is depicted has the outlook of a patriarchal age. Honour to parents and to those in authority is placed high among the virtues:

‘A wise son heareth his father’s instructions
But a scorner heareth not rebuke.’

The evils of despotism, however, are emphasised, and the oppressions of a wicked ruler are a common

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

enough experience to become proverbial. The wise man will pacify 'the wrath of a King,' for his wrath is death: while on the other hand:

'The King that faithfully judgeth the poor
His throne shall be established for ever.'

When we come to humbler people, the same virtue of pity for, and kindness to, the poor is extolled and promised its reward, while vengeance is rebuked.

'Before destruction the heart of man is haughty,
And before honour goeth humility.'

With this outlook, high among the virtues comes naturally the form of wisdom that is prudence. It is for reasons of prudence and because of their consequences that greed and sloth are condemned:

'The drunkard and the glutton shall come to
poverty,
And drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags.'

It is folly to gossip, and indiscretion is dangerous to the indiscreet:

'He that guardeth his mouth keepeth his life,
But he that openeth wide his lips shall have
destruction.'

Particularly to be avoided, and the subject of constant warnings, are the strange woman, who

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

by her wiles and flattery, tempts men to destruction; and the contentious and nagging woman, whose irritating persistence is compared to 'a continual dropping' on a rainy day.

With a proper sense of values, the 'wise men' realised that a son who does not live up to his position deserves to be supplanted by a servant who has acted well and faithfully. Lying and cheating are condemned – 'a false balance is an abomination to the Lord' – and anger and violence deprecated.

There is profound wisdom, more far-reaching than in many of the proverbs, in the oft-quoted: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath.'

What the 'wise men' taught in general, then, was sound and honest, but not sublime. They were shrewd and practical, and did not think much of any one who was foolish enough to neglect his own interests.

'The simple believeth every word they said –
But the prudent man looketh well to his going.'

Sometimes they became a little cynical in the shrewdness of their observations:

'The poor is hated even by his own neighbour,
But the rich hath many friends.'

or again:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘It is nought, it is nought, saith the buyer,
But when he hath gone his way then he
boasteth.’

Their ideal in life was that chosen as the ideal by the Greek thinkers and writers. It was the ‘happy mean.’

‘Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is needful for me;
Lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say “Who is
the Lord?”’
Or lest I be poor and steal,
And use profanely the name of my God.’

On the level of wise conduct in everyday relations, the teaching of the ‘wise men’ is eminently sane. The man who followed their instructions would be a very respectable and reliable member of society. He would be truthful, modest, discreet, and industrious. He would not indulge to excess in any direction. He would be kind to his subordinates and those less fortunate than he, and respectful to those above him. Above all, he would avoid doing anything that the world would condemn as foolish or savouring of simplicity. To be outwitted in a bargain would be almost a crime. There were no Don Quixotes, in the ‘wise men’s’ ideal world, and inevitably they came up against the poets and philosophers of their nation. The over-sane is

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

always a source of irritation to the visionary and the enthusiast, and evidence of this difference of opinion is found here and there in the Prophets.

‘The wisdom of their wise men shall perish,’ says Isaiah; ‘Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,’ says Jeremiah. When it comes to theory, the Prophets at times directly contradict the explanations the ‘wise men’ put forward; and here we come again to the fundamental conception which rules the ‘wise men’s’ outlook on life. Starting with the assumption that the world is ruled immediately by a Just God, the ‘wise men’ accept as the basis of their philosophy the belief that goodness must therefore always be rewarded and wickedness punished. This idea is repeated in Proverbs in one form or another continually:

‘Evil pursueth sinners,
But the righteous shall be recompensed with
good.’

or:

‘There shall no mischief happen to the righteous,
But the wicked shall be filled with evil.’

or again:

‘The house of the wicked shall be overthrown,
But the tent of the upright shall flourish.’

and so on, through numerous examples.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

We may concede to the 'wise men' that, in a very general way their theory is true. Broadly speaking, a man who followed their precepts and led a prudent and virtuous life, was likely to achieve material success. Wickedness does frequently lead to disaster.

But, in an external and material sense, at any rate – not always. And there comes the difficulty. A little experience made the Hebrews question it, for they were obliged to recognise that, as far as the rewards of material prosperity go, the good man is *not* always free from misfortune, and the wicked often flourishes. Goodness, in the superficial and material sense, does *not* always *pay*. But if God is a just God, asked the 'wise men,' can it be otherwise?

The conception of the one Just God is a high conception attained to by the Hebrew race with much mental and spiritual effort. It was clung to with all the strength which goes to the support of a hardly-won truth, and it was inevitable that the admission of any new truth, which might seem to undermine the old, would be strenuously resisted. The acquisition of new truth can be, for a time, a denuding and desolating process. The first thing, therefore, that the 'wise men' did when they realised that their theory would not cover all the facts of life was to offer other explanations, which seemed to preserve this central truth.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Some of these explanations are such as might occur as possible solutions to any one who sat down to think out the problem. On the one hand, the wicked, they said, may flourish for a time, but have patience and you will see them overthrown; and on the other, the righteous, suffering for a time, gain by their suffering. It is sent by God to chasten and reprove, and when it has served its purpose will be removed.

Another theory put forward in a period when the family was regarded as the unit rather than the individual, was that a righteous man who suffered, was suffering for the sins of his parents. To us, living in a non-patriarchal age, this does not provide any satisfactory solution, but is rather a moral problem in itself. To the Prophets, too, it did not seem satisfactory, and they reverted to the orthodox assertion, 'Every man shall die for his own iniquity.' Occasionally there came to the 'wise men' ideas which might have led them to more satisfying solutions than any with which they endeavoured to prop up their theory.

'The memory of the just is blessed,
says one Proverb.

But the name of the wicked shall rot!'

The approval of his fellows may make amends to a man for some loss of prosperity.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Another proverb goes even further:

‘Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity
Than he that is perverse in his ways, though he
be rich.’

The anonymous writer is here feeling his way towards a solution to which as a whole the ‘wise men’ did not come near – the idea that there is a better reward for virtue than outward material prosperity.

For the most part, the writers whose works are collected in the Book of Proverbs are content with asserting and reasserting that righteousness *must* be directly awarded, and wickedness punished by disaster.

It is evident, therefore, that they did not successfully meet the objections which were raised against their theory; and presently the theory was definitely challenged. The most overwhelming challenge is contained in the Bible in the great dramatic epic of the Book of Job.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOOK OF JOB

IT is likely that the Book of Job was based on a traditional tale of a much-tried man who excelled in patience. But whoever wrote the book and told the tale in its present form, was one of the greatest poets of all time – a very bold thinker and the creator of a masterpiece. The book comes probably from the period of the Exile or between the Exile and the rise of the Maccabees. It was a time of much upheaval of thought and of great national trial, a time of heart-searching and the testing of conventional opinions. Bold and questioning spirits were almost forced by circumstances to challenge the orthodox theory of the prosperity of the righteous and the sufferings of the wicked. They *saw* righteous men suffering and the wicked prospering, and presently it was inevitable that they should begin to question the justice of it all. A writer with a keen dramatic sense, and with a message to deliver, put these questionings and his message into dramatic form in the Book of Job. Who he was we do not know; neither do we know the country or life that are depicted as the back-

ground of the story. The little that we do know is to be deduced from the Book itself, and in it we find an entirely non-Jewish life depicted, and many allusions to a life and land outside Palestine. It is a typical Eastern story but not typically Jewish at all in its setting.

The Book of Job has the distinction amid Biblical literature of being the nearest approach to drama in the Bible. Its best definition is perhaps that of Professor Moulton: 'a dramatic poem framed in an epic story.' There are many dramatic situations in Bible stories, but in no other is the story worked out to the same degree in anything approaching dramatic form. Apart from the setting, the Book of Job may be said in a sense to contain three acts, each act being a round of dialogue; it leads up to a climax at the close; and the characterisation is to some extent maintained, while Job's character is thoroughly worked out.

The characters of the three friends are defined, up to a point, and they speak in accordance with their characters, though they do not stand out as distinct personalities, who impress themselves on the reader. The Hebrew was too egocentric, too interested in himself and his own emotions to project himself readily into the character of others; and though the writer of the Book of Job gave the theoretic arguments put forward by the three friends their full weight, and was in no sense unfair to them, he failed in endowing the intel-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

lectual debating points to any marked degree with flesh and blood. Elihu, who breaks into the story near the end, and whose part is probably an interpolation, has the general characteristics of a rather rash and 'certain' young man, while Job's wife is mentioned only to add another cause of suffering to the tormented Job. 'Dost thou,' she asks, when the last of his afflictions has fallen upon him, 'Dost thou still hold fast thine integrity? Renounce God and die.' Her question implies an underlying sarcasm against the orthodox teaching, the theory of which has been examined in the study of the Book of Proverbs. Uprightness, it is suggested, is only worth while if prosperity results.

But what makes Job an approach to great *drama* is not merely the form, or the characterisation; it is the greatness of the clash of principles, exemplified in a personal history. The clash is that between the orthodox interpretation of the problem of evil and the daring denial of this interpretation by Job, and out of the conflict there emerges a new solution. Such conflict is always the basis of the greatest drama, and part of the test of greatness is the adequacy of the solution reached. We shall consider later how the Book of Job comes out of this test.

The prose opening, or the Prologue of the epic setting, begins with a short description of Job in the land of Uz, a man 'perfect and upright, that feareth God and escheweth evil.' He has acquired

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

immense riches, and everything goes well with him. He is a man who, the 'wise men' would argue, must be very good, because he is so prosperous, and as we see him at first, their theory would seem to fit. The scene then shifts to heaven. We see God surrounded by His ministering servants, among whom is one, Satan. He is not, however, our idea of Satan. The duty of the Satan in the Book of Job is to act as an *Inspector*, or *Examiner*, of things and persons, and test their genuineness. The Inspector hears God praising Job's perfection and challenges the phrase with a biting question. 'Does Job,' he asks, 'fear God for nought?' His question is the first scathing criticism in the book of the 'wise men's' theory. 'Since,' he says, in so many words, 'you reward goodness with prosperity, where is the virtue of being good?' So, as a test, the Inspector is allowed to destroy Job's prosperity. As we learn of Job's possessions by what is taken from him, we get an interesting picture of the life of a wealthy, pastoral chieftain. He loses by raids from hostile marauders, or from lightning and whirlwind, numbers of oxen and asses; herds of cattle; flocks of sheep; and his servants. In a final calamity his sons and daughters, evidently also wealthy, are overwhelmed with disaster and slain. But Job's goodness stands the test. He falls down and worships, saying, 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.' The Inspector, not satisfied, asks for a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

further test. He gets permission to afflict Job's person – not merely his property as before – as long as his life is spared. Job is smitten by a terrible and distressing disease. His wife, as we have seen, even tempts him to renounce God and die. But he replies: 'What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?' So in all this he 'did not sin with his lips.' Then, as he sits mourning and suffering on an ash-heap, his three friends hear of his affliction and come to comfort him.

We now pass from the prose setting to the drama in verse. Picture the scene for a moment, for it is the setting of the whole drama. Job, formerly prosperous and revered, used to all the luxury his position could give, waited on by his servants, now sits apart on a heap of refuse, rendered poor by a series of unparalleled disasters, shrinking from contact with his fellows because of his disease. Nearest him sit his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, bowed down in silent sympathy, but too overcome at first to speak. Farther off others pass to and fro, and sometimes one draws near and gazes upon him; and later on, perhaps, stands and listens to what the friends have to offer by way of comfort. The heat of the day beats down on them. By night the brilliant Eastern stars shine upon the little group unheeded, while seven days and nights go by. At last Job can contain himself no longer. He breaks out in

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

terrible lamentations, cursing the day he was born, and expressing his longing for death to end his misery. More than this, he questions the purpose of life in such a case as his:

‘Wherefore is light given to him that is in
misery,
And life unto the bitter in soul?’

.

‘Why is light given to a man whose way is hid,
And whom God hath hedged in?’

The three friends are conventional people, already puzzled that such a good man should suffer so. This outburst suggests to their shocked minds that there may be something to say to Job, and that it is their duty to say it. It gives them a chance to try to explain things a little, in accordance with the orthodox views. To begin with, they are very gentle and very general. Job has been a great friend of theirs and his reputation for virtue has been very high. Eliphaz at first suggests to Job that he must not lose confidence in God:

‘Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished
being innocent?
Or where were the upright cut off?’

From the outset we may notice what a great deal of good sense the three friends speak. They

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

put themselves in the wrong in the end, by their inability to adapt themselves to new truth; but the old truth was a step, nevertheless on the road to the new, and in its time had represented new vision. There was a great deal truly wise to be said in its support, and its believers were sincere and honest men. This is always the position when a new truth is ousting an old one, and it explains the difficulty, and even what often seems at the time, the tragedy of progress. Eliphaz in his first speech puts forward a view in line with what in the end leads to the solution, but he puts it forward as a reason for not changing established beliefs, and this Job cannot now tolerate.

‘Shall a man be more just than God?’

he asks,

‘Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?’

His attitude to life, too, is philosophic, if grey with the experience of an old man:

‘. . . man is born unto trouble,
As the sparks fly upward,’

he asserts, in a well-known simile.

The gist of his appeal to Job is to put forward the gentlest of the orthodox explanations of a righteous man’s sufferings:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth:

Therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty.’

Job replies in the bitterness of his soul, and denies that his sufferings are a correction for any sins he has committed, and his denial challenges Bildad to reply. As far as the characters are differentiated, Bildad is the narrowest in outlook and the most ready merely to accept his beliefs from tradition. To support his reasoning that since sin causes suffering, suffering must imply sin, he urges:

‘Inquire, I pray thee, of the former age,
And apply thyself to that which their fathers
have searched out.’

.
Shall they not teach thee and tell thee?’

The difficulty throughout the argument is that the friends cannot really get at what is troubling Job. They are perfectly satisfied with their theories, and if Job would only admit sin, the theories would, from their point of view, be upheld and God would be vindicated. But to Job has come the devastating revelation that he can never again so explain things. He has lost a truth to which he too had clung, and he is groping in a spiritual darkness of which his friends have no concep-

tion. He tries to make them understand, and his answer to Bildad reaffirms his innocence. His experience, as opposed to their theory, is that God 'destroyeth the righteous and the wicked,' and a large part of his torment is that he feels hopeless of finding his foothold again, amid the sea of doubt that has overwhelmed him. Zophar does not help matters by so misunderstanding his mental strife as to accuse him of boasting. Small wonder is it that he turns round on his friends with the exclamation:

'Miserable comforters are ye all!'

The picture he then gives of his desolation is enough to waken pity in any heart, but the friends by this time are becoming more heated in their argument, and one after another they return to the task of convincing him, this time with more direct charges.

Bildad emphasises the penalties that fall upon the wicked, and puts forward the one remaining orthodox view that children may suffer for the sins of their parents. In his reply Job, for a moment (taking the text as it stands), in arraiging the justice of this view, gets a vision of a solution which is not mentioned elsewhere in the Wisdom literature of the Authorised Version – the possibility of an adjustment in another world. The idea is not developed and does not come out in the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

final solution. Zophar puts forward yet another of the orthodox explanations of the problem of evil:

‘. . . the triumphing of the wicked is short,
And the joy of the godless but for a moment.’

And the accusations get nearer and nearer to being deliberate accusations of Job himself, when Zophar concludes:

‘The increase of his house shall depart,
His goods shall flow away in the day of his
wrath,
This is the portion of a wicked man from God.’

But Job has done with theory, and his former friends have so provoked him by their lack of understanding and their narrow outlook that he ceases to put any check on his patience, and telling them:

‘Mark me and be astonished,’

in a speech as vigorous and as emphatic as he can make it, he piles up, from experience, one denial after another of the truth of what they have said. He himself is horrified at his own conclusions, but *he will speak the truth as he sees it*, and not avert his eyes and pretend that he believes an explanation which does not fit the facts. He draws a picture of the flourishing state of many a wicked

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

man. 'How oft is it,' he asks them, 'that the lamp of the wicked is put out?' They know that some men die 'at ease and quiet,' and others 'in bitterness of soul,' and that both are alike in the grave.

'How then comfort ye me in vain,
Seeing in your answers there remaineth only
falsehood?'

This is really too much for the friends. As is usual in argument, when the arguers become heated they do not answer what has been said at all; they turn round and directly abuse Job. Eliphaz speaks first again, and he proceeds to draw up a formidable catalogue of sins, which, he asserts, Job must have committed, or he would not be suffering as he is. The sins throw an interesting sidelight on the ideals of an ancient Eastern people. They are those of despotic tyranny and inhospitality. We are in a land where the abuse of despotic power is a danger and a temptation, and where to refuse a man water, or to deny help to a wanderer, is a crime which may mean his death:

'Is not thy wickedness great?'

says Eliphaz,

'Neither is there any end to thine iniquities.
For thou hast taken pledges of thy brother for
nought,

And stripped the naked of their clothing.
 Thou hast not given water to the weary to drink,
 And thou hast withholden bread from the
 hungry.
 Thou hast sent widows away empty,
 And the arms of the fatherless have been
 broken.'

To such an astonishing perversion of facts has Eliphaz been driven by the need to vindicate a theory; for the 'perfect and upright' Job had, of course, never been *known* to commit one of these sins. The violence of his accusers has the effect of calming Job. He continues in pursuit of his own problem: How and where can he find God? For in all his doubt, Job, like a true Hebrew (whether he was himself actually of Hebrew origin or not), never loses faith in God's existence, or in the possibility of an explanation if he could only find it. A short contribution by Bildad, and one by Zophar that has got in error into Job's final monologue, add nothing to the argument. Job answers Eliphaz by giving a picture of his former state, when he was revered in the gates of the city:

'Because I delivered the poor that cried,
 The fatherless also that had none to help him,
 The blessing of him that was ready to perish
 came upon me,
 And I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

He boldly calls disaster upon himself if he has committed any of the sins of which he has been accused. If he has done these things he concludes, in a graphic figure of speech, with a special significance for people directly dependent on their own crops:

‘Let thistles grow instead of wheat
And cockle instead of barley.’

Job will speak no more, and his three friends, realising their failure, are silenced. The episode of Elihu’s intervention is not really part of the drama, but is almost certainly an interpolation. As it stands, it does in a way prepare for the climax. The impetuous youth, having embarked on an explanation which Job simply ignores, seizes on one idea after another, and is arguing about the folly of expecting insignificant man to affect the dealings of the God of all the heavens when, as his eyes travel round the horizon, a rumble of thunder is heard.

In a tensely dramatic scene, the quickening excitement of his speech keeps pace with the gathering storm, till at last he is awed into silence also. We almost see the storm approaching and feel it bursting around us; and out of its majesty and impressiveness there comes in the whirlwind God’s voice, questioning Job as to the limits of his knowledge. A vivid and imaginative review of the whole universe follows, while the storm

rages. The Voice makes clear the lesson that God has for Job. He learns that it is because of his ignorance that he has questioned evil alone as a mystery. The whole of God's doings are mysterious, the good as well as what seems evil in the world, and man has not enough breadth of vision or depth of knowledge to fathom their meaning.

God's power is demonstrated as His mighty works are passed in rapid review – the mysteries of creation, of light and darkness, of the sea, the lightning, the stars, and the rain.

Job is shown that, in addition to vast ignorance of these seemingly greater mysteries, he cannot even understand and explain the everyday happenings which keep creation in being. Job, humiliated, declares that he has no answer, and the lesson is driven home by further questionings, forcing him to admit his utter inability to save himself by his 'own right hand.' He is reduced to the needful frame of mind, one of humble reverence:

‘Therefore have I uttered that which I understood not.

Things too wonderful for me which I knew not.
I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ears,
But now mine eyes seeth thee,
Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent
In dust and ashes.’

He has learnt the lesson that reverent submission

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

is the only fitting attitude in the face of such mysteries as he had tried to fathom.

This is, of course, no solution of the problem of evil in the abstract; but the book demonstrates two things. First, in its day it was surely a tremendous contribution to progress of thought, to the overthrow of a creed which had become convention, and which could no longer satisfy inquiring minds; and the story thus vindicates fearlessness and honesty of thought. This is confirmed in the Epilogue, where, although Job has been humbled and has made complete surrender, God expresses approval of his free and inquiring spirit, and reproves the three conventional friends, who 'have not spoken of me the thing that is right as my servant Job hath.' Secondly, though the book provides no actual answer to the problems set, it gives Job, and us – for we can go little if any further to-day – a direction to follow. It is not, as has been pointed out, 'man's part to *solve* the world problem; his business is, as far as possible, to take up a proper attitude towards it.' And this is the real and most permanent lesson of the great dramatic epic.

In the prose Epilogue we are given a picture of a Job restored to prosperity, twofold that which he has formerly enjoyed, but this is a mechanical rounding of the story which need not concern us.

*

In any study of the Book of Job, the greatness

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

of the subject-matter and of the thought brought to bear upon it must be clear. In addition, we may claim for it heights of poetic achievement rarely if ever surpassed by any writer of the ancient world. The poetic passages are not all placed in Job's mouth, but the most poetic are inevitably his, because of the intensity of personal emotions with which he speaks.

As a sustained poem, full of poetic imagination and expression, how suggestive is that descriptive of the life of a miner:

‘Surely there is a mine for silver,
And a place for gold where they refine.
Iron is taken out of the earth,
And brass is molten out of the stone.
Man setteth an end to darkness,
And searcheth out to the furthest bound
The stones of thick darkness and of the shadow
of death.
He breaketh open a shaft away from where
men sojourn;
They are forgotten of the foot that passeth by;
They hang afar from men, they swing to and fro.
As for the earth, out of it cometh bread;
And underneath it is turned up as it were by fire.
The stones thereof are the place of sapphires,
And it hath dust of gold.
That path no bird of prey knoweth,
Neither hath the falcon's eye seen it;

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

The proud beasts have not trodden it,
Nor hath the fierce lion passed thereby.
He putteth forth his hand upon the flinty rock;
He overturneth the mountains by the roots.
He cutteth out channels among the rocks;
And his eye seeth every precious thing.
He bindeth the streams that they trickle not;
And the thing that is hid bringeth he forth to
light.'

Job xxviii, 1-11 (R.V.).

The vivid description of man's mastery over nature superior to birds and beasts, the emphasis with which the miner's loneliness in his explorations is brought out, afar from men, perilously hanging in his 'cage'; penetrating where the most daring of the birds and boldest of the beasts has never penetrated, with power over the rocks and control over the uncontrollable waters – all this is used dramatically to heighten man's powerlessness in one piece of exploration. For all his power there is one most essential quest where guidance fails him: he cannot discover the seat of wisdom.

This passage is remarkable for the general absence of similes. Each picture is quite direct and concrete, and yet the description is highly imaginative and within a very small compass a wonderful succession of pictures is drawn.

As contrasted sketches, two typical ones are Eliphaz's delineation of the righteous man in

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Chapter v and the tests of the wicked man put forward by Bildad in Chapter viii. The vision of the peace that rewards the righteous is a beautiful expression of trust and may be put beside many of the Psalms:

‘He shall deliver thee in six troubles.

Yea, in seven there shall no evil touch thee.

In famine He shall redeem thee from death;

And in war from the power of the sword.

Thou shalt be hid from the scourge of the tongue;

Neither shalt thou be afraid of destruction when it cometh.

At destruction and death shalt thou laugh;

Neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth.

For thou shalt be in league with the stones of the field.

And the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee.

And thou shalt know that thy tent is in peace;

And thou shalt visit thy fold and shalt miss nothing.

Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great,

And thine offspring as the grass of the earth.

Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age,

Like as a shock of corn cometh in in its season.’

Job v, 19-26 (R.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

We may note again the concreteness of the expressions and how the imagination is stimulated, not by any attempt at general description of the breadth and depth of God's protection, but by the mention of single things which are symbolic. It is not 'He shall *always* and *everywhere* protect thee, but 'In famine' and 'In war'; not 'Thou shalt have an undisturbed life,' but 'Thou shalt know that thy tent is in peace'; 'Thou shalt visit thy fold, and shalt miss nothing.' The most apt comparisons are those taken from nature: 'offspring as numerous as the grass of the earth'; an old age 'like as a shock of corn cometh in in its season.' The Hebrew mind thought in terms of single acts and definite images, and reasoned from the particular to the general. And this is a characteristic of lyric poetry.

Bildad begins his picture of the wicked man with two dramatic questions, the symbolism of which is again drawn from natural objects.

'Can the rush grow up without mire?
Can the flag grow without water?'

He means to imply that as the rush proves the existence of mire and the flag of water, so disaster proves the existence of sin, but for a moment another simile leads him from the main argument. The sudden withering of these water-plants when cut down, suggests to him the sudden destruction

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

of the wicked, and he goes on to describe the lot of the wicked in a series of forceful images:

‘Whose trust is a spider’s web

He shall lean upon his house but it shall not stand;

He shall hold fast thereby but it shall not endure.

He is green before the sun.’

Job viii, 14, 15 (R.V.).

and all his hearers in that Eastern land would get an image of quick withering at the last phrase.

Zophar, in the same round of speeches, takes up the challenge in a very vigorous attack on Job’s presumption in questioning God’s purposes. He expresses, in fact, very much the position that Job is in the end forced to, though at the moment it seems to Job nothing but futile theorising. The emphatic marshalling of the verse is magnificent:

‘Canst thou by searching find out God?

Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?

It is high as heaven, what canst thou do?

Deeper than Sheol, what canst thou know?

The measure thereof is longer than the earth

And broader than the sea.

.

He seeth iniquity even though he consider it not.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

But vain man is void of understanding.

Yea man is born as a wild ass's colt.'

Job xi, 7-9 and 11, 12 (R.V.).

The calm consolation of the passage which follows, depicting the man who has put away his unrighteousness reveals, by its contrast with this earlier passage, the versatility and skill of the poet.

'Surely then shalt thou lift up thy face without spot;

Yea, thou shalt be steadfast and shalt not fear:

For thou shalt forget thy misery;

Thou shalt remember it as waters that are passed away.

And thy life shall be clearer than the noonday;

Though there be darkness, yet it shall be as the morning.

And thou shalt be secure, because there is hope.'

Job xi, 15-18 (R.V.).

This is a passage which breathes benediction, and it has a suggestion of the blessedness of righteousness in and for itself, and its power to triumph over outward circumstance.

The finest and most sustained sweep of poetry, preluded by the storm, and having about it some of the character of the whirlwind which ushers it in, comes in the theophany at the close; but this

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

is best treated in considering the treatment of nature in the Book of Job.

The whole point of the drama culminates in a demonstration of God's direct working in all parts of the universe, and as in other Hebrew literature, nature is viewed in the closest dependence upon Him. Job, even in rebellion, never for a moment doubts God's overruling power.

'Who knoweth not in all these
That the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?
In whose hand is the soul of every living thing.'

In the theophany this point of view is taken for granted, both for inanimate and animate things. God made the cloud and darkness; He shut up the sea with doors. He 'commanded the morning' since man's days began, and 'caused the dayspring to know its place.' Rain and thunder, frost and dew, 'the cluster of the Pleiades,' the 'Bear with her train,' are all under His direct control. The appetite of the young lions and the hungry ravens is satisfied by Him; and the might of the horse and the strength of the eagle are His. His creations, the hippopotamus on land, and the leviathan by sea, are entirely beyond man's control; and it is the overwhelming realisation of this incomprehensible power over nature that reduces Job finally to 'abhor himself and repent in dust and ashes.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

A feature remarkable in nature as seen by the Hebrew poets is the entire absence of any maleficence. Awe-inspiring nature can be; but the storm and the whirlwind, the creatures, more powerful in some ways than man, have their own legitimate existence apart from him, and no evil intention is read into their crushing him or breaking asunder any humanly imposed bonds. In other words, the monotheism of the Hebrews saved them from the (frequently degrading) superstitions with regard to nature of the childhood of other races.

Apart from this general standpoint, which is typically Hebrew, the detailed references to nature in the Book of Job are those of a people thoroughly acquainted with the wild life of the desert and of lands bordering on the desert, and taking their imagery almost entirely from that and from pastoral pursuits.

In dealing with other aspects of the poetry we have noticed several of the nature similes. The land depicted is clearly not the land of Palestine. Snow, ice and frost are familiar phenomena. The life led is one of tents, and the wild asses and the fierce lions of the desert come near to it; while we have the unfamiliar illustrations of the hippopotamus and the whale. Most interesting, too, is the knowledge displayed of the stars and their courses. The writer of the book had no doubt studied them in nights under the open sky, in

wanderings with a nomadic people; and could appeal to those same people by the mention of their names, with which they, too, were familiar.

And the wonders of the heavens called forth awe and reverence from these primitive people, for the God who could:

‘. . . bind the cluster of the Pleiades
Or loose the bands of Orion.’

It was the descriptions of the stars that led the artist and poet, Blake, to produce one of his most characteristic and striking etchings:

‘When the morning stars sang together
And all the Sons of God shouted for joy.’

The life that is drawn for us is that of a highly developed shepherd people. They are in part dwellers in tents, but the chieftains were men of great wealth and authority. Thus Job owned, not only vast nomad flocks and herds, but oxen for ploughing; his sons dwelt in houses, and life in small, enclosed cities with walls and gates is known to them. They were familiar with the chase and with traps and snares, and also with mining, and the use of weapons of iron and ‘the bow of brass.’ One of the most obviously appreciative of the pictures is that of the horse. One reads into it the nomad Arab’s love of his high-spirited steed:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

'Hast Thou given the horse his might?

Hast Thou clothed his neck with the quivering
mane?

Hast Thou made him to leap as a locust?

The glory of his snorting is terrible.

He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his
strength.

.

He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and
rage;

.

As oft as the trumpet soundeth he saith, Aha!
And he smelleth the battle afar off.'

Job xxxix, 9 ff. (R.V.).

The virtues most valued are seen by the wicked actions that are most condemned. They are the removal of landmarks – the taking away, even under legal pretext, of the ox and ass of the needy and the widow. The virtues of hospitality are rated high, as we have seen in the final condemnation of Job by Eliphaz, where the worst he could find to say of him was, as we have seen:

'Thou hast taken pledges of thy brother for
nought

And stripped the naked of their clothing.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Thou hast not given water to the weary to
drink,
And thou hast withholden bread from the
hungry.

.

Therefore snares are round about thee,
And sudden fear troubleth thee.'

Job xxii, 6, 7, 10 (R.V.).

Job, in categorically denying each of these accusations by affirming the reverse, paints an ideal picture from his former life of the role of a patriarchal chieftain:

'My justice was as a robe and a diadem
I was eyes to the blind
And feet was I to the lame.
I was a father to the needy
And the cause of him that I knew not, I searched
out.

.

Unto me men gave ear and waited
And kept silence for my counsel
After my words they spake not again.'

Job xxix, 14-16, 21 and 22 (R.V.).

Purity of family life is set forth as the ideal to be followed; and a scrupulous fairness, which will not take advantage of a superior position in a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

quarrel, but is conscious always of direct responsibility to God in its actions:

‘If I did despise the cause of my manservant or
of my maidservant
When they contended with me;
What then shall I do when God riseth up?
And when he visiteth, what shall I answer him?

A morality is demanded that forbids any triumphing over a fallen enemy.

Trust in ‘fine gold,’ and the presumption that goes with any rejoicing in wealth is deprecated. Society was so far developed as to allow of the accumulation of possessions, but the standards reached forbade pride in these or excessive display. In short, on the social side, the life depicted is that of a manly, self-respecting people. A dignified sense of propriety and order, and exercise of kindness as well as justice were its ideals; while a well-defined moral code controlled the relations of its members to one another.

Apart from the great interest of its subject-matter and the beauty of its poetry, the Book of Job lives as giving indirectly a delightful picture of the life of an unidentified, nomad and pastoral people, in the dawn of history.

CHAPTER VII

ECCLESIASTES: A STUDY IN PESSIMISM

THE Book of Ecclesiastes is a masterpiece in the literature of pessimism. That it should maintain its appeal over so many centuries is remarkable, especially in view of the development of philosophic and scientific thought and knowledge in the two thousand odd years since it was penned. Judgments on the character of the writer and on the moral worth of his pessimism have been various. Some find nobility and some selfishness there. But his literary ability is unchallenged, and the spell his work throws over individual readers remains. This is the more noteworthy, because the book makes no pretence at being a consistent whole; it is, indeed, in itself, full of inconsistencies; and has, moreover, been subjected to additions and alterations which add greatly to the inconsistencies of the author as well as to the difficulties of the reader.

Apart from its purely literary qualities, this book of 'notes' – for it really is a series of notes on one theme – has some of the charm and intimacy of a frank personal diary. Herein, perhaps,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

lies the first secret of its attraction. The man who wrote it, is giving us of himself and of his own experience; the problem that interests him is a problem common to all the thoughtful among mankind. The theme of the book is the quest for happiness, the search for the blue bird of romance; and the author in telling of his own search tells it for every man.

The attribution of the authorship of Ecclesiastes to King Solomon was no doubt made by the writer for two main reasons. First, Solomon was the supreme type of the 'wise man,' and Koheleth wished to assume the cloak of wisdom. In taking Solomon, as it were, as a symbol, he was only acting in accordance with the customs of the time; the same is done in the Book of Wisdom, written later than Ecclesiastes. Secondly, no doubt, he wished to ward off criticism of the unorthodox views he was about to express, and indeed it was only the supposed authorship that kept Ecclesiastes in the canon. Internal evidence alone shows clearly that the author was no ruling king, while the period reflected was a late one of national decay and corruption. The language also is very late Hebrew.

Before turning to a close analysis of the book, we may note in passing that in form Ecclesiastes belongs to the Wisdom literature. The Unit Proverb is its basis. This is occasionally developed into 'essays' on a single theme sometimes verse

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

parallelism is used; sometimes parallel and rhythmic prose.

It has been established by modern criticism that in all probability Koheleth, the Preacher, as the writer entitles himself, was a Jew living in Alexandria about the second century B.C. It was a time when Hebraism was at a low ebb, and many of the leading Jews had left their country for some great Gentile city, while the influence of Greek thought was strong among the cultured classes. Koheleth shows this clearly; but though he had lost a great deal that was characteristically Jewish he was a Hebrew at heart. The Temple and the Law had lost their hold on him; he had abandoned the belief in a just God working immediately in the world to just ends; but he kept a belief in God as a universal Power, and like the 'wise men,' his outlook was frankly utilitarian. 'Cast thy bread upon the waters,' he says, '*for* thou shalt find it after many days.' The problem that worries him is '*What profit* hath man of all his labour?' Like the 'wise men' he has no traces of any strong national feeling; he is interested in *any* individual life and all things that may befall men. Unlike them, he is introspective and subjective, and his one intellectual craving is to piece together his observations into a conception of the whole. His pessimism is, intellectually, largely due to his failure to do this. He longs in vain to 'find out the work that God hath done.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

The Preacher has, as his starting-point, experience. It is his great virtue that he will see things with his own eyes, and that he refuses, for the sake of conformity to see what is not there. His moods vary, but though he reflects them as they are, his general trend and his theoretic conclusions are clear enough. 'Vanity of vanities,' saith the Preacher at the beginning. 'Vanity of vanities' is his theme at the close. What then are his main lines of thought in this search of his for happiness, and what the reasons for his failure? It is worth noting that before he starts consciously on the search he has reached his conclusion. His position of power and wealth (under the assumed role of King Solomon) has made him realise the folly of striving, and has led him to the dismal conviction that 'he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.' His quest, therefore, is a sort of *pis aller* – an attempt to find a refuge from the gloomy conviction; and this, it must be admitted, is a bad start. Looking on nature, he has already been oppressed by her deadening monotony. Is there a more weary passage in all literature than that which conveys Koheleth's own weariness at nature's (to him) meaningless repetitions:

'One generation goeth,
And another generation cometh;
And the earth abideth for ever.
The sun also ariseth,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

And the sun goeth down,
And hasteth to his place where he ariseth.
The wind goeth toward the south,
And turneth about unto the north;
It turneth about continually in its course,
And the wind returneth again to its circuits.
All the rivers run into the sea,
Yet the sea is not full;
Unto the place whither the rivers go,
Thither they go again.
All things are full of weariness;
Man cannot utter it;
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor the ear filled with hearing.
That which hath been is that which shall be;
And that which hath been done is that which
shall be done.
And there is no new thing under the sun.'
Ecclesiastes i, 4-10 (R.V.).

Nature appears with no aim, and change in a circle shows no advance. It is the lack of a goal *anywhere* that depresses the Preacher. In this mood he turns to test life and the practical enjoyments it may have to offer; and everywhere he turns he is brought up against the same blank wall of a goal-less negation.

Looking on human existence as a whole, he, like a later poet, sees man consumed by 'a restless unallayed desire.' He wishes to know the ultimate

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

goal of things, and is for ever precluded from knowing. He longs to discover whether life is worth while, or whether since death levels all, it is one supreme irony,—and there is no means of discovering. He does not dogmatise, for he is aware of his ignorance, but he refuses to come down on the hopeful side, however hesitatingly, since he cannot convince himself that there are honest grounds for so doing. Like Matthew Arnold, he had the misfortune—as far as intellectual repose is concerned—to live:

‘. . . between two worlds,
One dead, the other waiting to be born.’

Death, as it breaks in on life, leaves many obvious injustices for the individual, and he had lost the old belief of his fathers, in an automatically just God, while he had not yet groped his way forward to any new and wider conception. A conviction of personal immortality would largely have solved his problems, and it is evident that the idea was mooted. ‘Who knows,’ he asks, ‘whether men and beasts do share the same fate?’ But, as far as certainty goes, he gave himself the answer: ‘No one knows,’ and he would not deceive himself by an assumption he could not prove. He would not even

‘Trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill.’

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

This is, in fact, a conception of advanced faith in the face of appearances, and is quite foreign to the temperament of the 'wise man,' who always in the first place sought to base his theories on fact, and then, when pressed, sought to make appearances, as we have seen, fit his theories – though to this illusory refuge the Preacher would not follow him.

So, in his more detailed examination of human existence the lack of an aim and the absence of any proof of a just God, stultify all Koheleth's thoughts. Is happiness to be found in progress? How can it be when we do not even know whether our movement *is* progress? Without this knowledge all our efforts are 'vanity and a striving after wind.'

To work for the rewards of labour is equally as foolish as it is to work to advance things towards an unknown goal. The rewards as often as not, do not come – and if they do they turn like Red Sea apples to dust in the mouth. To this theme (as if in answer to the 'wise men') Koheleth constantly recurs:

'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver;

Nor he that loveth abundance, with increase;
'This also is vanity.'

The 'poor wise man' who delivers a city is forgotten when the danger is over. The 'race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Now if all this is true, and human life, when an attempt is made to survey it as a whole is so unsatisfying, what is it best to do? Koheleth set out to find an answer by various experiments which his wealth and position enabled him to make. In one of the most beautiful of passages – assuming the role of King Solomon – he tells how he built himself ‘a lordly pleasure house,’ and relates the conclusion to which he came:

‘I said in mine heart,
“Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth;
therefore enjoy pleasure”;
And behold this also was vanity.
I said of laughter, “It is mad!”
And of mirth, “What doeth it?”
I searched in mine heart how to cheer my flesh
with wine,
Mine heart yet guiding me with wisdom,
And how to lay hold on folly, till I might see
what it was good for the sons of men that
they should do under heaven all the days of
their life.
I made me great works;
I builded me houses;
I planted me vineyards;
I made me gardens and parks, and I planted
trees in them of all kinds of fruit:
I made me pools of water to water therefrom
the forest where trees were reared:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

I bought menservants and maidens, and had servants born in my house;

Also I had great possessions of herds and flocks, above all that were before me in Jerusalem:

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought,

And on the labour that I had laboured to do:

And behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind,

And there was no profit under the sun.'

Ecclesiastes ii, 1-7, 11 (R.V.).

Self-indulgence had been tried and found wanting. Other resources were turned to. If the piling up of wealth only leads to some such disappointment as the knowledge that it will be squandered by a foolish heir, perhaps the actual exercise of power may prove more satisfying. The Preacher, however, has seen too much of the abuse of power and the evils of despotism, to be attracted by it. He has too keen a feeling for:

'All the oppressions that are done under the sun.'

and for 'the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter,' to regard the attaining of power as anything but a snare. Not by that road can he find satisfaction. Tyranny, in fact,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

is rampant in his world, and power so commonly something to be abused, that this is one of the most convincing arguments as to the futility of mere virtue which constantly suffers oppression. Because of tyranny, in some moods, he thinks the dead are happier than the living; and because of it, yet another possible sphere of happiness is ruled out: work for the social betterment of others. To attempt this is to run one's head against a brick wall. Further, as if to forestall a possible argument from one who may choose that sphere in happier times, Koheleth adds that, even if this were not so, how can you pretend to work for progress, when you do not know either what progress is, or the goal to which it is tending?

If, however, it is really useless to embark on any general enterprise with the idea that one is doing good, may not the pursuit of some individual hobby keep one from pessimism. Cannot learning fill a man's time? The reply must be individual, and Koheleth answers for himself in a sentence: 'Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.'

And as far as any ulterior purpose goes, riches, in this uncertain world,' 'do not come to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.'

Most bitter of all has the Preacher found his relations with women. Here is nothing but disillusionment and shifting sand:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

'I find a thing more bitter than death,
Even the woman whose heart is snares and nets,
And her hands as bands:
Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her;
But the sinner shall be taken by her.'
Ecclesiastes vii, 26-29 (R.V.).

So round the compass of all his experiences he comes back to the one conclusion – theoretically – 'Vanity of vanities: all is vanity.'

To this conclusion there is only one logical application: if not the actual ending of life, at any rate withdrawal from it and renunciation. But Koheleth was too true a Jew to rest satisfied with this purely abstract conclusion or to guide his practical life by it. His emotional convictions surge up repeatedly, even in contradiction of his philosophy. In spite of appearances, he cries: 'God *shall* judge the righteous and the wicked,' and 'Though a sinner . . . prolong his days, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God,' and, in spite of all, though he may be able to give no reason for it, he holds firmly to the conviction that 'Wisdom excelleth folly, as much as light excelleth darkness.' Further, when he comes to the practical application of his philosophy, instead of going on to the logical issue, he simply turns aside and gives moderate and sane advice about the conduct of life. There is no doubt that, for all his pessimism in theory, Koheleth went

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

on living because he enjoyed life. One suspects, also, that he wrote Ecclesiastes mainly because he enjoyed writing. It is perhaps the only book in the Bible which contains a good deal of art largely for art's sake.

What, then, are the practical conclusions offered? They are that, in spite of theory 'Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king,' and in even greater contradiction, since moral values do not here enter, 'a living dog is better than a dead lion.' The advice that follows may be summed up in a phrase: 'Work, eat, and enjoy, while you can, and accept the inevitable cheerfully.' Work to pile up great wealth is futile, but work to achieve, and to be able to enjoy, leisure, can afford pleasure in itself; and this, to Koheleth, is its only use. 'Let every man enjoy good in his labour. It is the gift of God,' and there is nothing better for a man than this.

Koheleth did not set out to be consistent, and theory or no theory, he *knew* that there was a great deal of enjoyment to be got out of life, by the man philosophic enough to take it as it comes, and self-controlled enough not to indulge to excess in any direction. Like his kinsmen the 'wise men,' his practical ideal was the 'happy mean,' and like them, there was no place in his philosophy for martyrs or fanatics. Even righteousness must be pursued only in moderation: 'Be righteous,' he says, and adds, with a touch of humorous cynicism,

‘but not overmuch. Why shouldest thou destroy thyself?’

Koheleth refuses to take himself too seriously or to encourage others to be too serious themselves about life. He is, in fact, a good-humoured dilettante.

But his general conclusion is, up to a point, much the same as that of the intensely earnest author of the Book of Job. Both agree that the limitations of man’s ignorance must be accepted; though Koheleth knew nothing of the spiritual struggle which preceded Job’s resignation. Much the same result, too, is come to in *Rasselas*, in the ‘Conclusion, in which nothing is concluded’; and the biting satire of *Candide* has no other solution. ‘Il faut cultiver notre jardin,’ is Ecclesiastes’ solution in other words. And not one of the three is an actual answer to the problem put.

Is, then, no satisfactory answer possible?

It must be admitted that of the ultimate origins and purpose, of things, we are no more certain than Job or Ecclesiastes. The problems of evil, and of the suffering of the righteous, in spite of a wider knowledge of cause and effect, of heredity and evolution, remain problems unsolved to-day. The bounds of our ignorance may be pushed back a little further, but our intellectual limitations remain. From one point of view, an understanding of *what* a flower is, is denied alike to botanist and poet. Personal immortality, of which, as a solution, a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

glimmering hope seems to have come once both to Job and to Koheleth, if held at all as a solution, is held by faith and not by proof; and those of Koheleth's temperament would refuse it.

There remain one or two considerations. One is that Koheleth, having set out to find happiness, did actually come near to stumbling across it, as it were by a side-track, when he had stopped looking for it. He realised the pure enjoyment a man can get out of moderate and balanced work, if he simply accepts the enjoyment it brings without ulterior motive; and herein, as Carlyle has told us, lies part of the practical answer to his quest.

Secondly, in his search for material rewards and tangible pleasure he failed to reach a conception belonging rather to the new than to the old dispensation; namely, the possibility of a happiness which can rest superior to misfortune and unhappy surroundings, a state of blessedness dependent on inner convictions and inner resources.

Given his premises, Koheleth reached the only conclusions possible, and held withal to a sane, *practical* philosophy of life. The solution if it is to be different from his, must lie in a shifting of emphasis in the premises, and a change in definition of the terms employed.

For all his diletterism, and his careful avoidance of anything too serious, Koheleth was a great artist. The beautiful and appropriate imagery of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

several of his phrases have become household words. 'Cast they bread upon the waters' is a synonym for disinterested generosity – although in Ecclesiastes a reward 'after many days' is actually promised. We owe such proverbial phrases as 'the crackling of thorns under a pot,' and the 'fly in the ointment,' to him. Can we find a more vivid expression for futile activity, than 'a striving after wind'? The wisdom of many of his sayings has been affirmed by acceptance in all ages. His are the proverbs: 'A threefold cord is not quickly broken'; 'The sleep of a labouring man is sweet'; 'A good name is better than precious ointment.' He could rise also to sublime heights of dignity and solemnity. A lovely piece of sustained symbolism is the well-known passage in the last chapter, where every image can be translated into prosaic description of the gradual physical decay of approaching age:

'Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy
youth,
Or ever the evil days come and the years draw
nigh,
When thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;
Or ever the sun, and the light, and the moon,
and the stars be darkened,
And the clouds return after the rain:
In the day when the keepers of the house shall
tremble,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

And the strong men shall bow themselves,
And the grinders cease because they are few,
And those that look out of the windows be
darkened,
And the doors shall be shut in the street;
When the sound of the grinding is low,
And one shall rise up at the voice of a bird,
And all the daughters of music shall be brought
low;
Yea, they shall be afraid of that which is high,
and terrors shall be in the way;
And the almond tree shall blossom, and the
grasshopper shall be a burden,
And desire¹ shall fail:
Because man goeth to his long home,
And the mourners go about the streets:
Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden
bowl be broken,
Or the pitcher be broken at the fountain or
the wheel broken at the cistern;
And the dust return to the earth as it was,
And the spirit return unto God who gave it.'
Ecclesiastes xii, 1-7 (R.V.).

¹ R.V., note.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BOOK OF WISDOM: A REPLY TO ECCLESIASTES?

WHETHER or not the apocryphal Book of the Wisdom of Solomon is intended as a reply to the pessimism of Ecclesiastes, an answer of considerable force could be drawn from its pages. The fact that the cloak of Solomon is again assumed has been taken as a sign that such an answer was intended. The Wisdom of Solomon was probably written by a Greek-speaking Jew of Alexandria about the first century B.C. It is full of signs of Greek influence both in thought and diction, but it belongs to the Wisdom literature of the Hebrews in its general outlook on life – its emphasis on right conduct, and its recognition of the universality of God's working, with Wisdom as his right hand. Greek philosophy, however, has brought to this book a fervour and warmth for an abstract theory consistently worked out, which is lacking in the purely Hebrew mind. The result has been described as 'the most brilliant product of pre-Christian Hebrew philosophic thought.'

In the opening chapters there are many assertions

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

which might be taken as a direct attack on Koheleth's philosophy, and they may be treated for a moment as so intended. In the view of the writer of Wisdom, thinkers like Koheleth went astray because they lacked singleness of purpose. Koheleth's scepticism defeated its own ends, for God is not found of those who distrust Him, and 'crooked thoughts separate from God,' while 'wisdom will not enter into a soul that deviseth evil.' Koheleth had lamented that death was the end of all, and that with apparent injustice it levelled the righteous and the wicked. The writer of Wisdom puts forward the solution which Koheleth put aside. 'Righteousness,' he boldly declares, 'is immortal.' His challenge to the philosophy of Ecclesiastes, intentional or unintentional, becomes rapidly more definite. Ungodly men, he says:

' . . . said within themselves, reasoning not
aright,
Short and sorrowful is our life;
And there is no healing when a man cometh to
his end,

.

'Because by mere chance were we born,
And hereafter we shall be as though we had
never been.

.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘Come and let us enjoy the good things that now are.’

This is really a not unjustifiable paraphrase of some of the expressions in Ecclesiastes, and if it is not intended as a reply the coincidences are remarkable; but like many a heated arguer, the writer is certainly unfair to the Preacher when he goes on to say that those who argued thus, advocated oppression of the poor and weak and took their own strength for law. Ecclesiastes, at any rate, condemns oppression and does not glory in his own power. The writer of Wisdom is on surer ground when he repeats more clearly the one argument that might have answered Koheleth – if he could have been convinced of its truth –

‘. . . there is a prize for blameless souls,
Because God created man for incorruption,’

and again,

‘. . . the souls of the righteous are in the hands
of God,
And no torment shall touch them,
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have
died;
And their departure was accounted to be their
hurt,
And their journeying away from us to be their
ruin:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

But they are in peace.

For even if in the sight of men they be punished,

Their hope is full of immortality;

And having borne a little chastening,

They shall receive great good.

Because God made trial of them,

And found them worthy of Himself.'

Wisdom of Solomon ii, 22-23; iii,

1-5 (R.V.).

This beautiful and familiar passage is a striking illustration of the influence upon Hebrew thought of Greek philosophic teaching about individual immortality. The story of the cross-fertilisation of national literatures, and the stimulus one can bring to another, is full of interest. Not the least in interest, or in importance for the human race, is that brought by Greek thought to the Jews, while the Jew contributed something in which the Greek was lacking. We have seen that the reasoning of the 'wise men' on the problems of evil and suffering led to no universally satisfactory solution. The ingenious explanations put forward were one by one rejected by the Prophets; shattered in Job's mighty challenge; or undermined by the scepticism of Ecclesiastes. Given the premises, there was in fact no way out. But when another world was brought in to redress the balance of this world's ill-assorted burdens, a solution was found. What, however, was the argument that could convince of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the truth of this solution? Here came in the Hebrew contribution. Since the world is ruled by a God whose justice cannot be questioned, and the ending of life with man's visible existence, is not, as Ecclesiastes emphasised, compatible with justice, there must be individual immortality, at least for the righteous. On this theme, the writer of Wisdom bases his whole argument. Immortality is his triumphant reply to those who have doubted God's Justice:

‘The righteous live for ever,
And in the Lord is their reward,
And the care for them with the Most High.’

On the other hand it is part of that justice that the unrighteous should pay the penalty of being cut off and forgotten. The ungodly may ‘flourish for a season,’ but after a time they ‘shall be rooted out.’

In a series of sustained and graphic similes the writer develops his reasoning concerning the folly of self-indulgence (again possibly an answer to Ecclesiastes) and the vanity of riches. The ‘winged lightness’ of the comparisons, and the easy passage from one to another are Greek rather than Hebrew in style. They are typical, however, of the style of the Book of Wisdom. It is written in the first person, as if the foolish and the wicked were speaking in their own defence:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

'We took our fill' (they lament) 'of the paths of
lawlessness and destruction,
And we journeyed through trackless deserts,
But the way of the Lord we knew not –
What did our arrogancy profit us?
And what good have riches and vaunting
brought us?
Those things all passed away as a shadow,
And as a message that runneth by:
As a ship passing through the billowy water,
Whereof, when it is going by, there is no trace
to be found,
Neither pathway of its keel in the billows:
Or as when a bird flieth through the air,
No token of her passage is found.
But the light wind lashed with the stroke of her
pinions,
And rent asunder with the violent rush of her
moving wings, is passed through,
And afterwards no sign of her coming is found
therein;

.

'So we also, as soon as we were born, ceased to
be,
And of virtue we had no sign to shew,
But in our wickedness we were utterly consumed
Because the hope of the ungodly man is as
chaff carried by the wind.
And as foam vanishing before a tempest;

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

And is scattered as smoke is scattered by the
wind,

And passeth by as the remembrance of a guest
that tarrieth but a day.'

Wisdom v, 7-11, 13, 14 (R.V.).

The development of the simile of the passage of a bird through the air, is particularly Greek in form, and might be paralleled in Homer. The ethical sentiment of the comparison which it is used to illustrate is characteristically Hebrew.

As a reply to those who argued that the righteous man is often cut off in early life, Wisdom opposes a sense of values which has been recognised by much later writers as a true answer:

'It is not growing like a tree,
In bulk, doth make man better be,
Nor standing long an oak, three hundred year,
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere:'

.

For 'in short measures, life may perfect be,' wrote Ben Jonson. The writer of Wisdom had long ago realised the same thing:

'For honourable old age is not that which
standeth in length of time,'

he says,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘Nor is its measure given by the number of years;
But understanding is grey hairs unto men,
And an unspotted life is ripe old age.’

Wisdom iv, 8, 9 (R.V.).

He goes even further and suggests that early death is a benefit to the righteous:

‘He was caught away, lest wickedness should
change his understanding,
Or guile deceive his soul.

Being made perfect in a little while, he fulfilled
long years;

For his soul was pleasing unto the Lord;

Therefore he hastened him away out of the
midst of wickedness’ (R.V. margin)

Wisdom iv, 11, 13, 14 (R.V.).

This is a Hebrew – or moralised – version of the Greek ‘Whom the gods love die young.’

One by one, then, the writer of Wisdom has opposed the arguments of the sceptics as to the justice of God’s dealings with men, by putting forward the doctrine of individual immortality. He has shown that when once this is accepted some answer, at least, can be offered to the difficulties they raise, and in his enthusiasm he sees the answer as an all-sufficient one; but he realises that the sceptics may justifiably ask for proof, and he goes on to provide it. First, speaking

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

as in the person of Solomon, he dwells on his common human birth, 'for all men have one entrance into life, and a like departure'; but more than to other men, in response to prayer, there was given to him understanding and 'a spirit of wisdom.' To him Wisdom imparted knowledge and raised him to friendship with God. The ecstatic description of her powers should be read as a whole (Chapters vi to ix). All that is good and truly desirable dwells with her on earth. A Platonic conception sees her as:

' . . . more mobile than any motive,
Yea, she pervadeth and penetrateth all things
by reason of her pureness.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
A clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty
. . . an image of his goodness,'

while,

'Because of her I shall have immortality.'

Individual experience and certainty, however, are not the only arguments used, to convince the sceptics that their view of the purposelessness of life was wrong. Such arguments have the disadvantage that they can always be met by individual lack of experience and lack of certainty, and neither arguer then gets any further. One of the roots of Koheleth's pessimism was, as we have

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

seen, his inability to find any goal in the processes of nature or of history. Their aimlessness weighed down his spirit. The writer of Wisdom claims that wisdom not only gives understanding of the processes of nature, but that the meaning of human history is revealed when it is viewed as under her direction. Bible history is reviewed from the Creation up to the escape from Egypt of the Children of Israel, and through all wisdom is seen at work on the side of righteousness; bringing back the erring; guiding and protecting the righteous; calling in love the sinner to repentance; patiently judging, chastening, and instructing, and leading in the right path, towards a definite goal. The sin of idolatry was one to which the Children of Israel set among heathen peoples were specially prone. It was condemned repeatedly in burning language by the Prophets. The writer of Wisdom, appealing as a 'wise man' to the reason, dwells specially and eloquently on its folly:

'Miserable were they, and in dead things were
their hopes,
Who called them gods which are works of men's
hands,
Gold and silver, wrought with careful art, and
likenesses of animals,
Or a useless stone, the work of an ancient hand.'

Fear and superstition led men on until:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘In bondage either to calamity or tyranny they
Invested stones and stocks with the incommuni-
cable name.’

Particularly forceful and permanent are the passages which describe the demoralising effect on character of yielding to superstition or to fear, as exhibited in Hebrew history, and especially in the story of their delivery from Egypt. The whole is to the writer an illustration of the bold claim: ‘The world fighteth for the righteous.’ The description of the Plague of Darkness and its effects on the Egyptians is so striking and true a picture of the psychological effect of fear in all ages that it deserves quotation:

‘And in terror they deemed the things which they
saw
To be worse than that sight on which they
could not gaze.
And they lay helpless, made the sport of magic
art,
For they that promised to drive away terrors
and troubling from a sick soul,
These were themselves sick with a ludicrous
fearfulness.
For even if no troublous thing affrighted them,
Yet, scared with the creeping of vermin and
hissings of serpents, they perished for very
trembling.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

For wickedness, condemned by a witness
within, is a coward thing,
And, being pressed hard by conscience, always
forecasteth the worst lot:
For fear is nothing else but a surrender of the
succours which reason offereth.'

Wisdom xvii 6-12 (R.V.).

The writer of Wisdom, though in common with the 'wise men' of Proverbs he made a universal appeal to reason and conscience, was possessed with an ardent belief in the mission of the Jewish people. This was the guiding thread in his interpretation of history. Wisdom had worked ceaselessly to keep them in their destined path, and the events of history could all be read in the light of his theory. Through the Jews 'the incorruptible light of the law was to be given to the race of men.' Here was the hidden purpose of all their trouble and striving. Here lay the test of progress, slowly revealed through the centuries, the meaning so far of history. It was not 'vanity of vanities,' but a great and glorious destiny.

The universality of the teachings of the 'wise men' has already been matter for comment. Intellectual appeals cut across national boundaries and their lack of emotional qualities rules out violent nationalism. A disinterested study of man as man, of the best way of living, does not go with exclusiveness, and it is natural that it was

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the writings of the 'wise men' which should first show signs of outside influence in Hebrew literature. Both form and thought were affected. On the literary side the writer of Wisdom clothed noble ideas in splendid language, and the book may lay claim to greatness on both grounds. It is a remarkable example of reasoned argument running through nineteen chapters and sustained at a very high level of literary achievement.

Although the writer of Wisdom believed fervently in the role of his people in history his was no message of isolation. He saw them as the bearers of a gift to all mankind, and he conceived of God as the universal, moral Governor of the whole world. It is easy to trace the connection between such conceptions and Christian teaching, and between the conception of wisdom and the teaching concerning the Word in the Gospel of John; and this is the more interesting because the Messianic conception does not occur in Wisdom literature. In the wisdom of Solomon we get the nearest approach in the Old Testament or the Apocrypha to Christian teaching.

CHAPTER IX

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITINGS OF THE PROPHETS

PERHAPS the most interesting, and certainly the most peculiarly characteristic of all the forms of literature in the Old Testament, are the writings of the later Prophets which comprise four large and twelve small 'books' at the conclusion of the existing canon. It is not possible to discuss entirely as a whole the style of books written by something under twenty writers, differing in temperament, in imagination, in education and in ability, and ranging over at least one hundred and fifty years of eventful history; yet because of their common object, there are certain qualities which the Prophets have in common, and about which generalisations can be made. The form of literary expression can never be detached from that which a writer wishes to express. An author who is giving expression to moral indignation and moral fervour, is justifiably set beside another with the same object and their methods of achievement, compared and criticised. All the Prophets are seeking just such expression. They all write

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

under a sense of urgent constraint and with a strong conviction of their mission. They speak because they believe God has commanded them and there is no evading what He has put upon them, lead them where it will. This, then, is the first factor influencing their literary style. They are men who are striving to deliver a message which they feel is not wholly their message, but which they have been bidden to deliver; and great is their sense of responsibility. They feel responsible not only for the message they give, but the burden of the consequences if they fail to give it is on their consciences also:

‘. . . The word of the Lord came unto me,’ says Ezekiel, ‘saying, Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: . . . When I say unto the wicked Thou shalt surely die, and thou givest him not warning, nor speakest to warn the wicked from his wicked way to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness, nor from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul.’ – Ezekiel iii, 16 ff. (R.V.).

The Prophets had realised to the full the moral implications of being their ‘brother’s keeper.’

Denunciation of evil-doing, the foretelling of disaster, and of the possibilities of final redemption they *must* undertake. The sense of constraint

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

inevitably affects their style. While it frequently involves simplicity and directness, this is mingled at times with obvious effort over conveying what they have to say, to people who have not heard what they have heard and whose eyes are sealed to their wider vision. This labour is particularly noticeable in Ezekiel, for example, where often elaborately worked-out symbols are used to explain the purport of his message.

Secondly, they are men, who have in common great intensity of feeling, which frequently carries them, as it were, outside themselves, whether in denunciation, in grief, or in rapture at the remoter possibilities of deliverance and salvation, for the remnant of a perverse and sinning people. Although they may vary in range of vision and in spiritual insight, vision and insight are possessed of necessity in some degree by all the Prophets. That something less than vision, the imagination which can suggest to them how to bring home their message, how to illustrate their meaning and re-enforce it by parable, by allegory, by picturesque imagery, is possessed also in some degree by all; while their burning zeal for righteousness and justice gives a quality of sincerity, which is an outstanding feature of the prophetic writings.

The extraordinary confidence, with which they speak when their passion is at its height, only belongs to those under the strain of great emotion, and this confidence, again, affects their style. The

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

imperative mood is constantly used in direct command. Modifications and circumlocution are absent. As the Prophet has obeyed, so the people should obey; and if they would, the result is as certain as is the dire result of their hard-necked obstinacy.

‘Hear the word of the Lord,’ says the Prophet; ‘Remember these things’; ‘Hearken unto me.’ Apart from commands, categorical statements are made full of assurance. ‘Behold Damascus . . . *shall be* a ruinous heap.’ ‘The Lord *shall be* king over all the earth.’ ‘The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and will by no means clear the guilty.’

This absolute certainty of their mission, this vivid realisation of the end in view, makes frequently for rapidity in argument, an almost sledgehammer driving to the point, full of force and vigour, and a relentlessness of temper which is reflected in the language used.

These general characteristics could only be illustrated by long extracts, but any one turning to the Prophets will easily find illustrations.

When we come to closer analyses of the different books, we shall find many differences, but the characteristics mentioned can be predicated in greater or lesser degree of all in turn.

In literary achievement, as in other spheres, Isaiah stands unchallenged as the greatest of the latter Prophets, and will be dealt with at greater

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

length than the rest. Critics agree that there is workmanship in the Book from at least two hands, and the distinctive features of Chapters xl to xlvii will be considered separately; but the writer of most of Chapters i to xxxix, like the later writer, was first and foremost a great poet. His subject-matter is great and the language and treatment match the subject. The stormy period of Judah's history, 740-701 B.C., through which he wrote and prophesied, saw more than once the threat of disaster. In 735-734 B.C. the Kings of Israel and of Damascus in alliance, and in 701 B.C. Sennacherib, King of Assyria, threatened Jerusalem. Tradition says that Isaiah suffered martyrdom after this last crisis. Certain it is that throughout these years he took prominent part in the endeavour to save his fellow-countrymen by forcing them to realise why they would not be able to resist invasion and by what means they might gain security. The opening chapters form a vigorous indictment of Judah and Israel for their sins of faithlessness, their superficial standards of values and their frivolities. Pictures are set before them of inevitable destruction; of temporary and partial respite; and prophecies are made of destruction about to befall other nations, while a final vision is revealed of the blessedness of the remnant of a restored and ransomed Israel.

Isaiah's intensity of feeling expresses itself in a diction of grandeur and strength, made picturesque

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

by vivid illustrations and imagery, and flashes of insight from the resources of a rich imagination. An extract from some of the 'woes' pronounced in the early chapters (a 'device' which may be compared with the Beatitudes) illustrates his careful balance of phraseology, his selection of the most forcible language for his purpose, and the whole, sustained rhythm of his passages:

'Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope. That say, Let him make speed, let him hasten his work that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come that we may know it.

'Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

'Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!

'Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: which justify the wicked for a reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!

'Therefore as the tongue of fire devoureth the stubble, and as the dry grass sinketh down in the flame, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have neglected the law of the Lord of Hosts, and

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

despised the word of the Holy One of Israel' – Isaiah v, 18–24 (R.V.).

The careful balance of this, as of other passages, is quite free from any straining after effect. The Prophet, and the translators, have mastered the great secrets of style – the right word in the right place and no words that are superfluous. The phraseology is memorable. To 'draw sin as it were with a cart rope,' is an example in the passage quoted. W'atchman, w'hat of the ni'ght?' is a haunting and rhythmic question from Isaiah. What a picture of helplessness on the one hand and power on the other is suggested by such a description in a phrase, as 'The heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll: and all their host shall fade away as the leaf fadeth from off the vine, and as a fading leaf from the fig-tree.' Most striking is the imagery employed to convey the majesty and power of Jehovah. Isaiah does not describe this majesty directly, but leaves it to be inferred from its effects. Thus Egypt is depicted as in terror because of the shaking of the hand of the Lord of Hosts over the land; men as hastening to hide themselves 'from the glory of His majesty when He ariseth to shake mightily the earth'; at His lifting up 'the nations are scattered.' The impression of overwhelming power is strengthened by this indirect, suggestive method.

A device used very skilfully by Isaiah is that of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

contrast. A picturesque passage in which it is effectively employed tells of the downfall of Damascus:

‘Ah, the uproar of many peoples, which roar like the roaring of the seas; and the rushing of nations, that rush like the rushing of mighty waters! The nations shall rush like the rushing of many waters: but He shall rebuke them, and they shall flee far off, and shall be chased as the chaff of the mountains before the wind, and like the whirling dust before the storm. At eventide behold terror: and before the morning they are not.’ – Isaiah xvii, 12-14 (R.V.).

Such contrasts are depicted at times in a single simile. ‘The multitude of thy foes shall be like small dust, and the multitude of the terrible ones as chaff that passeth away.’ But it is not in denunciation that the man Isaiah is most surely revealed. The pictures he draws of a state of peace and redemption, when the terrors he is constrained to predict have spent their force, reveal to us a person full of pity and yearning over the erring people, whom he is obliged to condemn, and whose good is his most ardent desire. His greatest power, perhaps – his greatest appeal certainly – finds highest expression in these wonderful visions; but the question of the teaching of the Prophets on war and peace looms indirectly so

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

largely that it will be dealt with separately in a subsequent chapter.

In Chapters xl to lxvi we have – as the critics agree on literary grounds, apart from others – the work of another writer. In general the style is more flowing and more freely emotional. The appeal is more intimate and pleading, the poetry more subjective and lyrical. The prophecy which occupies the whole of the twenty-seven chapters is a prophecy of the restoration of Israel and the return from the Babylonian exile, which took place in 538 B.C. The theme gives opportunity for visions of peace as glowing as those of the earlier writer, and for passages which are really lyric songs of repentance, hope, and thanksgiving. The music of song and vision is unsurpassed in the Old Testament; a few verses may illustrate it:

‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith the Lord. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; that she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. . . . O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold the Lord God will come as a mighty one, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd, He

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

shall gather the lambs in His arm and carry them in His bosom, and shall gently lead those that give suck.' – Isaiah xl, 1, 2, 9–11 (R.V.).¹

The extraordinary stateliness and ease of the opening verses of several of the chapters of this prophecy are among its remarkable features. The writer launches himself immediately on the full stream of inspiration. 'Keep silence before me, O islands,' he cries, 'and let the peoples renew their strength'; or 'Listen, O isles unto me; and hearken ye peoples from far,' or again in a question form, which introduces a majestic passage: 'Who is this that cometh from Edom? In dyed garments from Bozrah?' A question is a device frequently used most effectively by the Prophet. 'Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?' introduces the wonderful picture of 'Jehovah's ideal servant' (Chapter liii). Several of the chapters open with a challenging command: 'Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.' Or again: 'Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.'

The Prophet's intensely human feeling leads him to frequent personifications, and in these he may almost be said to indulge in the 'pathetic

¹ The whole chapter should be read.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

fallacy' when he calls on inanimate objects in nature to rejoice over Israel's redemption:

'Break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest and every tree therein, for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob and will glorify Himself in Israel.'

Jerusalem is called upon as a *person*, able to put on 'beautiful garments' and to be assured directly, 'All thy children shall be taught of the Lord and great shall be the peace of thy children.' In vivid imagery he conceives of good tidings brought by a *personal* messenger.

'How beautiful upon the mountains' (he sings), 'are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace, that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth.'

The intimacy resulting from his methods makes the later Isaiah the most persuasive of the prophets. In 607 B.C. Assyria was overthrown by the Chaldeans, who took its place in the onward march of conquest. In the writing of another of the 'major prophets, Jeremiah, who prophesied in Jerusalem through the period preceding and including its destruction by the Chaldeans in 586 B.C., we see reflected the struggle of a fine but highly-strung nature to deliver under compulsion a message

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

unwillingly received and delivered in vain. The result is a series of almost unrelieved lamentations, which have added a common noun to our language – Jeremiads. The evil he sees around him *hurts* Jeremiah; he can hardly believe that his people will not turn and reject it.

‘A wonderful and horrible thing is come to pass in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?’

He is sensitive to his finger-tips, and in his prophecy there recur again and again unrestrained expressions of despair. Thus, interpreting his message from the Lord, he cries:

‘I am pained at my very heart, my heart is disquieted within me. . . . O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war!’

Through siege and exile he suffers with his people, and his style is often a cry from the misery that results.

His conception of Israel’s redemption is deeply spiritual, untouched by any materialism, and in this vision he achieves calm:

‘I will put my law in their inward parts, and in

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

their heart will I write it; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.'

And again:

'I will give them one heart and one way that they may fear me for ever; for the good of them and of their children after them.'

The quiet confidence that is felt, is reflected in the straightforward simplicity of the assertions; but we do not find the colour or the glowing vision which are to be found in Isaiah.

Less of poetry is to be found in Ezekiel, great and imaginative writer though he is. He watched, as an exile since 597 B.C., the disaster which Jeremiah experienced. Like Jeremiah he belonged to the priestly caste, and this influenced the form of his prophecy. He sets to work with great care to frame allegories and parables which shall convey his message in a way that at times seems laboured. Thus a symbol of a vine tree cast into the fires occupies six verses of a chapter, leading up to the short statement:

'As the vine tree among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so will I give the inhabitants of Jerusalem.'

The illustrations are very carefully thought out and developed, and there is much skill displayed

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

in the arrangement and presentation, but spontaneity and lyric quality are thereby largely ruled out. A striking example of his skilful use of allegory is the vision of the valley of dry bones. It tells in symbol of the restoration of Israel, steadfastly foretold by Ezekiel. The salvation of and through a remnant was the heart of his message.

The last of the four 'major prophets' in the canon, Daniel, is passed over here, as his apocalyptic visions are in a class apart, and some of the special features of apocalyptic prophecy are considered in our last chapter.

In the 'minor prophets,' from Hosea to Malachi, there are to be found vivid pictures, flashes of insight, phrases which stand out in themselves as literary achievements. The volume of output is less, their inspiration less sustained, but several of these short books contain much that we would not willingly let go. It is not possible in a series of short essays to make a detailed analysis of the writings of each, but a few examples may send the reader afresh to the originals, and to the enjoyment of passages as fine occasionally as anything in the 'major prophets.'

Hosea, an early northern prophet, may be compared with Jeremiah for emotional quality, and for the lack of conscious artistry in his unrestrained writing. Like Amos, who preceded him, he foretells the coming break-up and scattering of Israel; but he is tenderer and more per-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

suasive than the rugged shepherd prophet. One classic phrase is his: 'They have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind'; and his lovely vision of the return of Israel from her backsliding – spoken, be it remembered, to a pastoral people, who loved the *land* – must be quoted:

'I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall blossom as the lily and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and blossom as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon.' – Hosea xiv, 4–7 (R.V.).

We are reminded again, in Joel's vivid picture of desolation, literal as well as symbolic, that it is to people near to the soil that the prophets spoke: 'That which the palmerworm hath left, hath the locust eaten; and that which the cankerworm hath left hath the caterpillar eaten.' (See also the rest of the Chapter i). Joel puts a whole spiritual philosophy into one stately sentence:

'Rend your heart and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God; for He is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy, and repenteth Him of the evil.'

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘I will restore you the years that the locust hath eaten’ is an imaginative phrase. ‘Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision’ is another.

Amos, as he tells us, is a shepherd prophet. Author of the earliest of the later prophetic books of the Bible, he has high literary qualities. He condemns in vigorous language, the self-indulgent living of his people and foretells the inevitable punishment.

The punishment which will fall on Israel’s neighbours must fall, he shows, on Israel also for the same sins; there is no special treatment for the chosen people.

The passage conveying his conviction of his mission is vivid and forceful:

‘Shall two walk together except they be agreed?

Will a lion roar in the forest when he hath no prey?

Will a young lion cry out of his den if he have taken nothing?

• • • • • • •
The lion hath roared, who will not fear?

The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?’

Amos iii, 3, 4, 8 (R.V.).

And there is imagination and grandeur of conception in such simple but apt similes, as:

‘Let judgment run down as waters and righteous-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

ness as a mighty stream.' 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion,' is a lament coined with a proverbial compactness.

Jonah must receive special mention as the only one of the prophetic books written wholly as an allegory. It is told without elaboration, and it may be set beside Ruth as a protest against narrow nationalism such as Nahum exhibits. Jonah, against his will – and after his resistance has brought disaster on himself and on others – is sent to prophesy the downfall of Nineveh, which, delayed awhile, took place finally in 607 B.C. It is a very human touch that makes the prophet resentful of the success of his warning – when the people of Nineveh heed, repent, and are saved instead of destroyed. He is taught pity for the enemy people by the incident of the gourd; and the prophecy closes with a conception of a God who feels not only for the children of Israel but for struggling, purblind humanity in general – and also for the flocks and herds, which would have suffered in their destruction:

'Should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city wherein are more than threescore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?'

The prophecy of Micah, a contemporary of the first Isaiah, is of special interest for its denuncia-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

tion, not so much of the sins of the people, as of the abuse of power by the mighty.

‘The prince asketh, and the judge is ready for a reward; and the great man he uttereth the mischief of his soul: thus they weave it together.’

His concern is for the moral welfare of the ordinary people, and he expresses memorably the spiritual conception of conduct, which is one of the greatest of the prophets’ contributions to the development of Hebrew thought:

‘He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?’

A vigorous and finished prophecy is that of Nahum, on the fall of Nineveh (607 B.C.). It is a poem on a terrible downfall. The vivid imagery is full of colour; the clash of battle, the desolation that follows, are called up before us in striking pictures with no waste of words. We can see the fever of preparation:

‘The shield of his mighty men is made red, the valiant men are in scarlet; the chariots flash with steel in the day of preparation and the spears are shaken terribly. The chariots rage in the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

streets, they jostle one another in the broad ways; the appearance of them is like torches, they run like the lightnings . . .’

And then the desolation:

‘A multitude of slain and a great heap of carcases; and there is no end of the corpses’;

and the whole prophecy closes with a series of contrasts masterly in its irony, descriptive of the passive powerlessness of those who had been mighty:

‘Thy crowned are as the locusts and thy marshals as the swarms of grasshoppers, which camp in the hedges in the cold day, but when the sun ariseth they flee away and their place is not known where they are.’

Canon Driver holds that Nahum in his few short chapters comes in dignity and force nearest to Isaiah of all the prophets.

There is fine poetry also in Habakkuk, who wrote probably at about the time of the fall of Nineveh and the rise of Chaldea. Particularly splendid is the ode which envisages God’s appearance to judge the foes of his chosen people (Chapter iii). The magnificence of His approach is conveyed in sublime language that seems to *create* something luminous and dazzling:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘His glory covered the heavens
And the earth was full of His praise.
And His brightness was as the light.
He had rays coming forth from His hand.

‘The sun and moon stood still in their habitation:
At the light of thine arrows as they went,
At the shining of thy glittering spear.’

Habakkuk iii, 3 ff. (R.V.))

So awe-inspiring is the vision that fear and trembling overcome the prophet himself. By the use of concrete and familiar imagery he brings the forthcoming destruction home to his readers, but with skilful contrast he turns the picture of desolation into a sublime profession of faith:

‘For though the fig tree shall not blossom,
Neither shall fruit be in the vines
The labour of the olive shall fail
And the fields shall yield no meat;
The flock shall be cut off from the fold
And there shall be no herd in the stalls,
Yet will I rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.’

Habakkuk iii, 17, 18 (R.V.).

The aptness, the skill in turning suggestive and memorable phrases, the power to appeal to the imagination in a penetrating flash, is found in

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

varying degree all through the prophetic books. These high literary qualities may, finally, without going into further detail over the separate characteristics of the remaining books, be illustrated from the last two, though they were written, one probably, the other certainly, as the prophetic strain was dying down, after the return from exile. Comfort and beauty are conveyed in verses from Zechariah and Malachi: 'Not by might nor by power but by my spirit, saith the Lord': 'They shall be mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels'; 'Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise, with healing in His wings'; 'At evening time it shall be light'; and how exactly right and permanently fresh are such short phrases as 'a book of remembrance,' 'a day of small things,' 'prisoners of hope.'

Finally, one general problem must be studied a little more closely. The aim of the prophets was to convince and to persuade. What are the particular methods of persuasion they adopted? First, emphasis must be laid on something which does not belong strictly to method. One who would persuade must have a clear conception of the end in view. In the case of the prophecies the end varies, but is always clearly conceived. In some cases the aim is to convince an erring people of sin, that they may turn from their evil ways while there is yet time. Denunciation of the sins and

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

depiction of their consequences, are contrasted, with visions of the joy and peace that ensue, when they are repented of and renounced. In other cases encouragement is sought for sorrowing and suffering Israel. Pictures of ransom and restoration are mingled with condemnation; and disaster is foretold for the persecutors of Israel. Stress is always laid on the moral aspect of redemption. It is something which can *and will* follow a turning from evil ways, though a time of trial may be necessary. The righteousness and justice of God are the qualities most emphasised. These must be accepted and rejoiced in; and their joyful recognition is indeed a condition of redemption. The prophets, in their endeavour to get home their message never lower their standards, and their emotion never for a moment becomes sentimentality.

Secondly – and here we come specifically to method – in the most persuasive portion of the writings of the prophets, each separate prophecy, with a definite end in view, forms an artistic whole; while, within the framework, varying devices are employed. A direct command, which is in itself a challenge, is given; or the stimulus of a question is used to rouse interest at the outset. The repetition of words, or of sentences, only slightly altered, is another device, accessory to persuasion, and is frequently used. It is essential when people are listening – possibly not too willingly – to repeat,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

indirectly if not directly, and the synonymous parallelism of the prophet's rhythmic prose makes such repetition easy. Examples can be found almost anywhere. Here is Jeremiah:

'O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself.

It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.'

Or Ezekiel:

'Behold I, even I will bring a sword unto you,
And I will destroy your high places
And your altars shall become desolate,
And your sun-images shall be broken,
And I will cast down your slain men before
your idols.'

Or Micah:

'Thou shalt sow but shalt not reap:
Thou shalt tread the olives but shalt not anoint
thee with oil;
And the vintage but shalt not drink the wine.'

And so on.

Concrete and familiar imagery ensures quick apprehension. The particular is far more convincing than the general. Single phenomena in nature, known to all as destructive, typify disaster:

'As a tempest of hail, a destroying storm, as a

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

tempest of mighty waters overflowing,' is within the range of every one's experience.

Intimate human relations are used as symbols of the dealings of the Lord with His people:

'As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so doth thy God over thee.'

There are frequent references to the care – or neglect – of the shepherd for his sheep; and comparisons that, as we have seen, would appeal to tillers of the soil and growers of vine and olive.

Restoration to spiritual health has as its outward sign that once again:

'The pastures of the wilderness do spring, the tree beareth her fruit, the fig-tree and the vine do yield their strength.'

The most essential requisite for persuasion, however, is neither intellectual clarity, needful though this is, nor any particular device used. It is an emotional quality, a human interest, an ardent longing to persuade, for the sake of those who are to be persuaded.

All the prophets were great lovers of their land and of their people. They all had a zeal for righteousness, and a burning faith in the ultimate working-out of God's purpose for His chosen people. Power to persuade and right to plead meet here on common ground.

CHAPTER X

THE PROPHETS ON WAR AND PEACE

ONE aspect of the teaching of the Prophets, which has just been touched upon in the preceding chapter, is of such special interest to the modern world, that it is deserving of special study. They have a great deal to say, both indirectly and directly, on the subject of war as an instrument in history and peace as an ideal. There is much about peace that is exquisitely beautiful, while there is, of course, much that is simply the expression emerging from the mental and moral background against which their writings must be placed. As regards war, they were little, if at all, in advance of the general attitude of their time, and to read into their attitude the modern, moral condemnation which is widespread to-day, would be unjustifiable. We may, perhaps, safely say that while war by the 'masses' was regarded as a normal means of revenge and of triumph over an enemy, the prophets conceived of it as a means, used by Jehovah, to punish wickedness and to purge an erring nation of its sins. War to them was on the side of *righteousness*.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

It may be pointed out that there is a clear difference between this claim, and the cruder claim, so usually made by nations in time of war, that righteousness is on the side of *their* war. The prophets did not claim right for their own nation in strife. They saw clearly enough that warfare, looking at it from a detached standpoint, was the result of wrong-doing, and they realised it therefore as an inevitable penalty and a consequence of sin. Evidence of this attitude can be gathered from every one of the prophetic books; one example may therefore suffice by way of illustration. When Isaiah foresees the wave of conquest that is coming from Babylon for the destruction of the Jews, this is how he describes it:

‘*The Lord of hosts mustereth the host for the battle. . . . Howl ye, for the day of the Lord is at hand; as destruction from the Almighty shall it come! . . . to make the land a desolation and to destroy the sinners thereof out of it.*’

In the same way he tells of the destruction of Assyria in its turn, and of Egypt, and so on, as *purposed by the Lord* – the Lord of Hosts. Punishment by His sword through a human instrument, is seen as playing an essential part in the working out of history, and there is no idea of condemning as such, either the instrument of war or those who use war as an instrument. Those who ‘shed

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

innocent blood' and 'know not the ways of peace' are condemned, certainly, but this is on individual grounds. The individual is condemned also who seeks merely his own ends by blood: 'Woe to him,' says Habakkuk, 'that buildeth a town with blood and stablisheth a city by iniquity.' This is not 'of the Lord,' but, on the other hand, the military triumph that brings with it, as the prophet foresaw, the overthrow of wickedness and is the penalty for sin, is claimed as God's doing, and for His way of working there can, of course, be no moral condemnation, though its full terror is recognised.

The belief then, in war, and the conception of war and its consequences to the Jews in captivity and exile as a means of purging away sin, and as a preliminary, therefore, to the establishment of righteousness, is the first conception put forward by the prophets. But *since* war is a consequence of idolatry and of sins of all kinds – although its working-out may, in the prophets' view, be good in a sense – it would clearly be far better if both cause and effect were dispensed with. If war to the prophets is not something for condemnation in itself, it is something terrible and to be dreaded, and in applying *any sort* of moral standards to such an evil as war, they had, albeit unconsciously, begun the movement for its abolition. Here we must summarise again for a moment the historical setting in which the prophets wrote. They wrote for a period of Jewish history of something over

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

two hundred years, from about 740 B.C. During this period Assyria (Nineveh) rose, and, in its turn, fell before Chaldea in 607 B.C., Chaldea (Babylon) defeated Egypt (605 B.C.), carried the Jews into exile, and in 586 B.C. captured Jerusalem. Just over fifty years later Chaldea, in its turn, fell before the rise of Persia, and in 538 B.C. Cyrus put forward his edict allowing the return of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem and giving opportunity for its rebuilding.

Of the prophets, Amos and Hosea in the north, Micah and Isaiah in the south, watched the rise of Assyria, and foresaw with increasing certainty the coming overthrow of Jerusalem and the horrors of conquest and exile. Jeremiah saw the fall, and Ezekiel wrote in exile; Nahum bore witness to the overthrow of Assyria with the fall of Nineveh; while the latest prophets, ending with Malachi, wrote after the return from exile. They thus lived and wrote amid the clash of mighty forces, which were visibly moulding history, and it was inevitable – sensitive thinkers, and strong of faith as they were – that they should evolve an explanatory philosophy of history in line with Jewish thought and tradition.

In order, therefore, to understand their attitude to war, we must recall some features already noticed, of that thought and tradition.

The idea of one righteous God, controlling by direct intervention the lives of individuals, and

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the destinies first of the 'chosen people' and then of all nations, was a great contribution of the Jewish people to the evolution of world thought. From this conviction there are certain deductions which, in the course of time, were bound to be made. In the story of the prophet Jonah, we have the logical conclusion to be drawn from the *oneness* of God: He must be the God of all nations, and even Nineveh is beneath His sway and His care. Here is another idea which strikes at the root of war, though that implication was not seen under the old dispensation. The prophets dwelt rather on the implications of the attitude to God of righteousness, and it is easy to see that if this is to be dwelt upon, together with the acceptance of war, one of two attitudes must be taken: either righteousness must always be envisaged as on one's side, or war must be seen from an impartial standpoint as a penalty for sin. This latter attitude, we have seen, was taken by the prophets. War, to them, is the vengeance of God on the guilty. Here is Nahum's emphatic pronouncement, for example: 'The Lord is a jealous God and avengeth; . . . the Lord taketh vengeance on His adversaries and He reserveth wrath for His enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and will by no means clear the guilty.'

The sins which the prophets declare are bound to bring destruction upon Israel are varied.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Some belong more to ancient history; some have direct practical application to-day.

Idolatry and dependence upon heathen nations are constantly condemned. Unfaithfulness to God's precepts, and ingratitude for His past mercies are dwelt upon. Spiritual slackness, evidenced by a love of luxury, dependence on material wealth, and moral degeneration make the Jewish people ripe for disaster. The abuse of power by the mighty, the failure of the leaders to lead, are common causes of downfall throughout history, and on these, as rampant in Israel, special stress is laid.

Another aspect of the teaching of the prophets, that on patriotism, is implied in this condemnation of their people's sins, and nationalism and international strife are very closely connected. In the first place, as we have noted, the prophets cared intensely for their country. They ardently desired its preservation; they mourned over its destruction; and they believed fervently in its resurrection and in the greatness of its destiny. Now and then, as in the case of Nahum, they were even fiercely nationalistic. Their mission was to their own people, and Jonah needed several lessons before he would believe that God could have a message for the people of Nineveh. He did, however, learn the lesson, and in other cases, too, there is a sense of the widening conception which was to reach its consummation in the New Testament.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

But if, sometimes, their patriotism appears narrow, it is never blind, or foolish, in the sense that they made the mistake of thinking it unpatriotic to see the faults of the people they loved. A large part of earlier prophecy consists of unflinching and vigorous condemnation of their people's wickednesses, and 'my country right or wrong' would have horrified the prophets, as indeed it should horrify any one with decent moral standards.

Apart from a natural love of their own familiar land and people, the basis of the prophets' patriotism was a passionate belief in their people's destiny – a conviction that theirs was a sacred mission, entrusted to no other nation – the execution and interpretation of God's will on earth and the upholding of the standard of His righteousness and justice.

This conviction transfigured the belief (which even to absurdity sometimes) every nation is prone to, that their own small country was the centre of the known world, and the pivot on which world history was to turn.

For in the sphere of ideas, as we know, in their case the belief was justified and their patriotic fervour was rightly merged in prophetic vision of an ultimate destiny for a restored remnant, fruitful of blessing for all creation.

It is not necessary to enumerate further the exact sins which allowed the tide of war to over-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

whelm the Jewish people. We have seen enough to realise that the teaching of the prophets about disaster through war as a consequence of sin, may be paralleled with the Hebrew teaching about the consequences to the individual of good or evil action. Good and evil both bring their direct reward.

Further, just as in individual cases, sometimes the general rule did not seem to work, and a good man's sufferings – as in Job – threatened to upset the whole theory, so the prophets at times were distressed by the fact that God apparently was holding His peace, 'when the wicked swalloweth up the man (or nation) that is more righteous than he.' The case of a nation, however, is unlike the case of the individual in that it is possible to wait for justification, to see what even 'the centuries say against the years' – and the prophets more than once pinned their faith to the slow grinding of the mills of history – or of God – against immediate appearances.

Further, seeing in war not only punishment for national sins, but a purging from sin (just as disaster to an individual, it was suggested, was sent in kindness, to purify and reform), the prophets went on to a vision of the fate of the purged and saved remnant, when the horrors of war and captivity were over, and here we come definitely to the positive teachings about peace.

We should expect, and it is indeed the case, that

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

as the prophets had seen in war a penalty for sin, so they would also paint the converse, and depict peace as the reward of righteousness. Thus, Isaiah, after foretelling desolation for those too much at ease, goes on to foresee the day when

‘the spirit shall be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness become a fruitful field. . . . Then judgment shall dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness shall abide in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace, and the effect of righteousness quietness and confidence for ever. And my people shall abide in a peaceable habitation and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.’ – Isaiah xxxii, 15–18 (R.V.).

We may say, then, that peace is envisaged both as a reward for, and as a result of, righteousness. As such it is not easy to attain, and those who cry peace where there is no peace are condemned as false and dangerous leaders. ‘They have seduced my people,’ says Ezekiel, ‘saying peace where there is no peace.’ On the other hand, the messenger who brings tidings of real peace, the peace that comes when God’s rule is accepted and established, is welcome indeed to a war-stricken people.

A nation that seeks after good and willingly accepts it is one fitted to receive the blessing of peace. To the afflicted Hebrew people, ‘tossed

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

with tempest, and not comforted,' the promise is given, 'I will set thy stones in fair colours, and lay thy foundations with sapphires. . . . And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the *peace* of thy children.'

A people with a proper sense of values, who no longer spend money for that which is not bread, and their 'labour for that which satisfieth not,' and who, forsaking their wickedness, 'seek the Lord while he may be found' shall in the end 'go out with joy and be led forth with peace.' To Jerusalem, cleansed of her sins, peace will be extended 'like a river.'

The triumphant restoration of the remnant of Israel, purged by suffering and at last firmly established in their own dwelling places, is the theme of prophet after prophet.

Thus, Ezekiel, in exile, foresees the day when 'They shall dwell securely in their land, and none shall make them afraid.' Amos closes with a vision of Israel at peace and safe: 'They shall no more be plucked up out of their land.' Zephaniah draws a final picture also of Israel restored and in its own land. It should be noted, however, that no moral verdict on war is implied in any of these visions. They are, in the first place, the outcome of the throwing up as ideals of a contrast to present experience. Such a state of things as was prophesied was indeed highly desirable after the stress and tumult through which Israel must

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

pass. It is natural, as we know, in our own day, for war-weary nations to long for peace. The main *moral* implication in the Prophets was, as we have seen, that this state would only be achieved when the people had turned to righteousness and had accepted God's laws and were willingly following his guidance.

But there is another conception of peace in the Prophets which strikes a new note in Hebrew literature. It is a conception not of the peace which is a national achievement and which is the opposite to war, but of the peace which is a personal attainment, and can be won as a gift from God in the midst of outward tumult. Its basis is faith and it is the result of direct relationship between the soul and God.

'Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace,' says Isaiah, 'whose mind is stayed on thee, *because he trusteth in Thee*' (Isaiah xxvi, 3). And again: 'Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near saith the Lord; *and I will heal him*' (Isaiah lvii, 19).

Compare this conception of a state of peace, and of the possibility of obtaining it – amid whatever outward circumstances – with the vain search for happiness in Ecclesiastes. The happiness there conceived of, is largely dependent on external circumstance, and there is no idea of the possibility of achieving a blessedness with which external circumstance has no connection. The influence of the individual who has won through to peace is

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

seen also as extended to the whole people; it is of each individual in a nation which is righteous as a whole, that Jeremiah writes, when he speaks of the new covenant that the Lord will make with the houses of Judah and Israel.

‘I will put my law in their inward parts,’ he says, ‘and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest.’ And this picture is combined with recovery from destruction, with the rebuilding of the city and its safe and permanent establishment. It is a picture of the attainment of peace through the changed hearts of the men and women who make up the nation. The state of blessedness, which follows the willing acceptance of God’s laws, is most beautifully depicted in identical terms by Isaiah and Micah:

‘And it shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. . . .

‘And He shall judge between the nations, and shall reprove many peoples: and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’ – Isaiah ii, 2, 4 (R.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Or turn to the short vision, which includes also the animal creation in Hosea:

‘And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the land, and will make them to lie down safely.’ – Hosea ii, 18 (R.V.).

In Isaiah in particular there is developed yet another conception of the way in which peace will come to the Hebrew people. His visions of the leadership of one whom Canon Driver describes as ‘the Ideal Servant of Jehovah,’ work in later with the Messianic hopes of the Jews, and his rule is always connected with the reign of righteousness and peace. We may take the vision as it emerges first in Isaiah:

‘The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. . . . For unto us a Son is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*. Of the increase of His government and of peace there shall be no end.’ – Isaiah ix, 2-7 (R.V.).

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Or take again that marvellous flight of the imagination, the picture of serenity and peace not only among men but throughout all creation, in the eleventh chapter:

‘And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Jesse, and a branch out of his roots shall bear fruit: and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. . . .

‘And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the basilisk’s den.

‘They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. — Isaiah xi, 1, 2, 6–9 (R.V.).

Peace, then, is set forth as a beautiful ideal which can and will be achieved when certain conditions have been fulfilled.

Destruction must come ‘until the spirit be poured upon us from on high,’ but when that

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

comes to pass, under certain conditions, then in the passage already quoted: —

‘Righteousness shall abide in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and confidence for ever.’

Most ecstatic is the vision of the re-establishment in Zion of the redeemed Israelites, which closes the prophecies of the first section of the Book of Isaiah and depicts the day when their warfare is accomplished *because* their ‘iniquity is pardoned.’ Picture follows picture; contrasts heighten the effects; concrete imagery gives a personal human appeal to the beautiful vision. ‘The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose. . . . Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing. . . . And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men though fools shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast go up thereon, they shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads: they shall obtain joy

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.' – Isaiah xxxv. (R.V.).

To sum up. The prophets have, then, no moral condemnation for war as such. They see in it an instrument used by God for the punishment of national sins; and a means of purification through suffering. The ending of war and the forgiveness of national sins are definitely connected; and the suggestion that war is a punishment for sin does imply a condemnation of it as connected with evil, and peace as a much-to-be-desired end which may be looked for as a result of righteousness. It is the gift of God to the individual who trusts in Him, and it is a consummation to be reached in Jewish national history under a leader, one of whose most honoured titles is, 'Prince of Peace!' In men of less spiritual insight than the prophets the visions of peace might have appeared as ideals due merely to war-weariness, and to a surfeit of horrors. In their writings this negative kind of ideal is transformed into a vision of a positive state of blessedness – a vision that has haunted the imagination and been a spur to the strivings of mankind throughout the ages.

To 'beat our swords into ploughshares' is a positive achievement, the conception of which remains a challenge to-day. 'They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain' is an ideal which comes near to the realisation of the sanctity

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

of all human life, which is the most fundamental argument against war through all time.

Furthermore, we are driven back by the prophets to heart-searchings as to the real cause of war.

Industry and commerce, politics, the methods of international relations, are so entirely different to-day, from what they were when they wrote, that no particular applications are possible. To-day our political relations are highly developed and organised. They necessitate complicated organisation: treaties of arbitration, the working out of a machinery for peaceful settlement, which was, of course, undreamt of in the early days of the world's history, but which to-day is of great importance. We may – and I think to-day, must – admit the necessity for all this, if we earnestly desire peace; but we must also turn again to the eternal principles enunciated by the prophets. We are, we may hope and believe, advancing to a complete moral condemnation of all war, which was not in their vision; but it is as true to-day as it was when they prophesied, that there is a price to pay for peace.

The claim they make is of universal application. It extends to every sphere and is valid for every aspect of international relations. Simple yet fundamental, their conclusion, already dwelt upon, may be emphasised in a sentence. The lesson they teach is that the price of peace – which must be paid if we would have peace – is individual and national righteousness.

CHAPTER XI

PARABLE AND STORY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

IT is more difficult, because of their intimate associations, to be objective in dealing with the stories of the Gospels than with any other aspect of Bible literature, but the attempt must be made, if a supreme achievement of that literature is not to be left untouched.

The parables of Eastern literature are not simply stories. They are told for the sake of their underlying meaning. But they are to be distinguished from fables in that they are true to life, and can in themselves be taken literally. The better and more appropriate they are, the less need is there to point their moral, and in most of those in the New Testament, the story, in its setting (which it is always important to notice) is self-explanatory. The meaning flashes on the mind as a discovery, and therein lies the intellectual attraction of the parable. An ordinary event becomes transfigured, and henceforth the meaning looms larger and more significant than the actual fact.

Just as Psalm xxiii has been, by common agree-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

ment, placed amongst the finest of the world's religious poems, so a New Testament parable, that of the Prodigal Son, ranks as one of the finest short stories ever told. While it is not simply a story, but a parable, in that its purpose was to convey a spiritual lesson, and not merely to relate the adventures which appear on the surface, it is so perfect, so probable, and so complete, that it bears detailed analysis as a story alone.¹

The perfection lies, in the first place, in the complete avoidance of superfluous detail. In twenty-one verses enough is related to suggest to any listener with imagination the experiences of several years of the Prodigal Son's life. There is no moralising, no attempt to drive home the lesson. The details which are given are all suggestive. What a background is filled in by the imagination as we read of the younger son's demand for his inheritance; of the quiet acquiescence of the father, who accedes to the request; of the son's immediate departure to a far country and his wasting of 'his substance with riotous living.' The high lights are picked out, and without further emphasis, make one conscious of the depths and shadows.

In the next stage of the story we are not told directly of the younger son's misery, but we are given two concrete facts: 'He would fain have been filled with the husks that the swine did

¹ St Luke xv, 11-32 should be read.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

eat';—he was in absolute destitution. 'And no man gave unto him'; he was shut off in a strange land from all human sympathy. Sure touches tell of his decision to return, where a wrong note would have checked our sympathy. Hunger brings him to his senses, but there is no doubt as to his change of heart and his real humility. Contrasts throughout the story heighten the effects. He comes to offer himself as a hired servant. His father greets him not merely as a son, but as a son to be specially honoured. He realises that one who was, as it were, dead, and lost spiritually as well as physically, is alive again in a twofold sense. The servants, and the elder brother, have not the same spiritual perception, and the elder brother's very human—if somewhat self-righteous—complaint shows this. The restrained reproof of the father, and the repetition of the same phrase, 'was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found,' close the parable with its objects attained. The end striven for in a parable is, of course, a realisation of the underlying meaning; but as subordinate objects necessary to this end, the first requisite is to engage the attention, and the second to stimulate thought. In the parable of the Prodigal Son these are achieved by means of a good story, with a human appeal so obvious that it need not be stressed.

A quality, not inherent in the story itself, but one equally necessary if the meaning is to go home, is

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

appropriateness to the audience. The different occasions of the parables should therefore be noticed. The parable of the Prodigal Son was told to publicans and sinners, who crowded round Jesus to hear Him, and to the Pharisees and scribes, who stood by murmuring when they saw that He received the publicans and sinners. It was one of three, all designed to bring hope to the sinners and to reprove the spiritual aloofness of the Pharisees. The other two, that of the lost sheep and of the lost piece of silver, take their imagery from the life of the field and the life of the poor woman's home. The domestic touches in the parables, and the feeling for nature are features which add to their appeal. There is something personal about them, a depth which is rooted in sympathy with everyday experience. This, generally speaking, distinguishes them in their teaching from the less intimate teaching or preaching of the Old Testament. Not only is the language simple and direct; the illustrations are homely, and taken from incidents that were quite ordinary and familiar to speaker and to listeners. This makes the unexpected applications all the more striking and memorable. Who, having once heard the parable, would ever hear again that his friend, the shepherd, was seeking a sheep he had lost, without thinking of the comparison drawn by Jesus? Who, in his country walks, would see the farmer sowing, or tares growing among the wheat,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

without going beyond the actual scene to the fresh application that Jesus had given to it? The idea of the gradual imperceptible evolution of the kingdom of heaven had to be conveyed to people who were expecting a great demonstration of pomp and power to usher it in. The aptness of the short parable of the mustard seed or of the leaven could not be surpassed. One occupies two verses in St. Matthew's gospel; the other, one verse: 'The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.' That is the whole parable – brief and definite indeed; but because it is taken from an action perfectly familiar, the imagination at once sets to work to fill out the comparison with the whole slow and thorough process; and the intellectual pleasure of discovery of one appropriate analogy after another, enforces the lesson far more skilfully than if it had all been enlarged upon in the first instance.

Delicate cameos also are the parables of the treasure hid in a field and of the pearl of great price:

'The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man seeking goodly pearls; who when he had found one pearl of great price went and sold all that he had, and bought it.'

That again, is the whole parable, but in the two

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

verses are two contrasted pictures, two contrasted states of mind; the whole story is suggested, of one who had good things, certainly; but not the best; and who, when once the best was realised, had no alternative but to seek it and let all else go. The one clear-cut idea of the parable is conveyed and nothing further is needed. On the surface the stories are very simple, but the lesson that remains is profound; and this is an important feature of effective allegory.

A number of the parables throw light on life in the small Eastern towns which Jesus and His hearers knew. We see the merciless servant who, forgiven himself, bullied those who were in his debt; the marriage customs of the day in the parables of the wise and foolish virgins and the marriage feast; the judge, who would not trouble to do justice till he found it was more tiresome to refuse than to give in; and most familiar to His hearers, no doubt, were the figures of the Pharisee and the publican at their worship in the synagogue.

A parable with a special message, very aptly told in answer to the lawyer who thought to evade the issue to which Jesus had led him, is that of the Good Samaritan. The man who might have been expected to ignore the wounded one and look after his own safety, not only tends him and bears him to safety, but before leaving him provides for his future beyond what could have been demanded of him. This parable moves, as do several, through

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

a series of pictures, which rise, one after another, before the mental vision, and lead to a summing up when the meaning becomes clear: 'Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour to him that fell among thieves?'

To give help, simply because help is needed – that is what it is to be a neighbour. The lawyer is answered, and after admitting it he does not try to argue further.

Another feature, indeed, of these wonderful parables, is their finality. They do not start the hearers arguing; they convince. One does not ask: 'Is that true?' but marvels at the self-evident and simple comparison. Incisive, vigorous, with no waste of words and no digressions, the parables live as models of short stories, told for the sake of their inner meaning but arresting and beautiful as stories in themselves.

The narratives of actual events in the Gospels have many similar characteristics. They are remarkable, as are the parables, for their simplicity, their directness and their pictorial quality. Most of all, however, are they remarkable for their restraint and objectivity. There is no parallel to this in the literature of biography.

In most biography there is a strong subjective element, and most critics would feel that a certain subjectivity is an inevitable ingredient. They would feel also that a weighing of the facts presented, a judicial summing up at different stages

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and a final criticism, were essential to a good biography. The biographer who dares to let his subject alone speak, and does not try to persuade and influence the attitude of his reader is rare indeed. In the story of the life of Jesus as told in the first three Gospels, there is neither this kind of subjectivity nor any criticism of the facts presented. The story is told simply as a record of events, without supplementary comments. Our opinions are not influenced even by the addition of an adjective praising the good or condemning the evil; there is no obvious assessing of values. Jesus is shown in many varied relations with His fellows; the things He loves and the things He enjoys are revealed in His acts and conversation. No remark of the biographer lays any stress upon particular aspects of the story. Selection of incident is the sole method used to throw His life and character into relief. And the result is the most living of personalities ever revealed through the written word.

It would be outside the scope of this book to attempt to analyse the nature and purpose of the life of Jesus, as these are revealed in the telling of the story. How far the method adopted contributes towards the vividness that results, and towards the permanence of the appeal, is our concern. St. John, at the end of his gospel, reminds us that there are many more events in Jesus' life that might have been recorded. The selection

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

made, therefore, by those who wished to present as complete a picture as possible of one whom they loved and honoured, is of great interest.

Apart from the stories of His birth, and the incident among the doctors in the Temple told by St. Luke, the biographers of Jesus tell only of the few short years of His ministry, and its close. They narrate His miraculous deeds, of His preaching and His teaching by parable, and they reveal Him in His dealings with a great variety of people: tender to the sick and maimed; pitiful towards the bereaved; thoughtful of the physical welfare of the multitudes who follow Him, and of His disciples; understanding of the special difficulties of those who came to Him for advice and help; tender and tolerant towards the fallen; supremely wise in His dealings with sinners; intolerant only of hypocrisy and self-complacency; infinitely patient with those who are slow to understand His message.

We form a picture of one who rejoices in the beauty of the corn-fields; who finds God's love revealed in the glory of the lily and His care in the life of the sparrows. We see Him at a wedding-feast, eating with publicans and sinners, and happy in the humble home in Bethany. We hear Him confounding the learned when they try to trap Him in His talk, and getting His message home by the aptest parable and imagery to the simplest among His hearers. And all this is conveyed to us by direct narration of incident and speech. Not

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

a quality is pointed out by indirect comment of the biographer. This is the more amazing when we remind ourselves of the relation between Jesus and the writers who told His story.

The Gospels were written to tell the short life-story of one whom the writers had accepted as their Leader, and who had been betrayed and crucified; one in whom their faith was so strong that they would risk death for their allegiance. They might have been expected to try to persuade by argument, to allot praise and blame, to indulge in a surely justifiable special pleading. But, as we have seen, in the Gospel stories we find none of these things. They are simple, unadorned records of events as the writers believed them to have happened; and these events are left to convey their own message. Several of the miracles as recorded may serve as further illustrations. When the story is told of the stilling of the tempest, the only comment is part of the story: 'And the men marvelled saying, 'What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?' The recorders make no attempt to go further and put forward their own point of view in answer to the question. And this is the case in the record of miracle after miracle. The story of the raising of Jairus's daughter is another illustration. It is a simply told tale, full of human touches and verisimilitude. We seem to hear the tumult of weeping and wailing at the house where the child lies

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

(as Jesus tells them) not dead, but sleeping. We hear the scornful laughter (but no comment is made upon it) and see Jesus taking control and removing the scorers. In the story as told by St. Mark (v, 22 ff.) the actual Aramaic words used by Jesus, *Talitha-cumi*, add an intimate touch. At the close we are simply told the fact that 'straightway she arose and walked' – and that is all. More extraordinary still is the wholly objective record of such incidents as Peter's betrayal, and the whole of Jesus' trial and crucifixion. No incident is glossed over; nothing is explained away. We learn, without an attempt to excuse them and without any allotting of blame, that the disciples could not watch with Jesus 'one hour'; that at His arrest 'they all forsook him and fled'; that Peter, overcome with fear (which is neither condoned nor condemned) denied Him, even with cursing and swearing. Pilate is not blamed, when, 'willing to content the people' . . . he 'delivered Jesus, when he had scourged Him to be crucified.' The long-suffering heroism, the tremendous self-control of Jesus are not emphasised; the events are simply narrated to the culminating revelation, given in the words of the centurion: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.' And even to that nothing is added.

Amazing as is this restraint, there is no question but that to it are largely due the breadth and permanence of the appeal of the Gospel stories.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Arguments become out of date; incidents are interpreted differently in different ages, and an interpretation placed upon facts in one age is likely even to obscure the facts themselves for a succeeding generation.

The compelling power of the bare narrative remains a perpetual challenge.

CHAPTER XII

ORATORY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: ST. PAUL

FOR us St. Paul is pre-eminently a writer of Epistles, but throughout his life, and in the view, no doubt, of his contemporaries he was first and foremost a preacher and speaker. There are extant in the Acts of the Apostles reports of six of his sermons and speeches, sufficiently full to justify their examination amid aspects of Bible literature.

St. Paul was excellently prepared for his life-work by birth and by education. 'A Pharisee, and son of a Pharisee,' as he claimed, and a student in Jerusalem under the learned Rabbi Gamaliel, he knew Jewish law and tradition through and through. This stood him in good stead when he addressed the Jews. The city of Tarsus, in Cilicia, where he was born and spent his early years, was famed as a city of liberal learning, and the Greek culture he no doubt imbibed there, helped him in his approach to the Greek and Gentile world. Finally, among the Romans, he could claim to be a Roman citizen, and 'free-born.' He further possessed, as an orator, what was to him the

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

qualification on which he would have laid most stress. He had been through a great emotional and spiritual experience, which had left him a changed man. The experience, as he felt it, is twice clearly recorded by him. On the way to Damascus, on an errand of persecution, he tells King Agrippa:

‘At midday, O King, I saw on the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them that journeyed with me.’ And the voice that came as he and his companions (who saw the light, but heard no voice) lay blinded on the earth, gave him his life task:

‘To this end have I appeared unto thee, to appoint thee a minister and a witness both of the things wherein thou hast seen Me, and of the things wherein I will appear unto thee.’ He learnt that he was to carry the message of salvation, not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles, and that faith and not ‘the law’ would be their sanctification. ‘Wherefore, O King Agrippa,’ he goes on, ‘I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.’ – Acts xxvi (R.V.).

However we may interpret the vision which thus turned Saul, the persecutor, into Paul, the missionary-preacher, one thing is certain. He was filled with the conviction of a message of which he was the vehicle; and thenceforth he spoke under a compelling power as great as that felt by the prophets – a compelling power to which he surrendered himself willingly and to the uttermost.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

As in the case of the prophets, this conviction of the worth of his message is the first secret of his convincing oratory, and it carries with it as a corollary a sense of responsibility and an intense earnestness. St. Paul's mission is to convince. He takes every opportunity, and he shows, in doing so, a keen dramatic sense. He puts an able and adaptable brain to the task in hand, bringing forward his message in no set form, but seeking out rapidly that which will most appeal to the particular audience before him. His intensity and passion make him employ a very direct type of oratory. His logic is clear, his arguments are concise. There are (as we have the speeches recorded) no diversions from the main lines of thought, though there is careful marshalling of relevant matter. St. Paul was out to convince the Jews that in Jesus they had the fulfilment of the law of the prophets; and to convince the Gentiles that the salvation offered was of universal significance, and that all men could share in it by faith. To the Jews he spoke as a Jew, and appealed to them through recalling the familiar events of their national history. Among the Greeks he was ready to take as his starting-point features of heathen worship.

The inherent dramatic quality of his oratory was added to by the dramatic occasions for his speeches. Once he addresses, and for a time reduces to silence, a raging mob. He has just been

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

saved from them as they were 'about to kill him.' As the Roman soldiers carry him up to the castle, bound with chains, the captain, strangely enough, grants his request to 'speak unto the people.' He had spoken to the captain in Greek; to the crowd, held by 'a great silence,' he speaks in Hebrew. He appeals to them as a Jew brought up to 'the perfect manner of the law of the fathers.' In telling them of his conversion, he is careful to relate that the announcement of his mission was brought to him by 'one Ananias, a devout man according to the law having a good report of all the Jews'; but he will not flinch from delivery of the final message which came to him in a trance in the temple, and which he knows will be anathema to his hearers: 'I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.' That ended the speech, for the tumult that followed made the Roman captain issue the command that he should be brought into the castle.

An equally dramatic opportunity had presented itself to him in Athens, where 'certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics encountered him,' and being always ready 'to tell or to hear some new thing,' brought him to the hill Areopagus and bade him speak. We can imagine the scene: From whence Paul stood, on an eminence with the Athenians crowding round him, he could look up to the great temple of Athena Parthenos, the Parthenon on the Acropolis, with the magnificent statue of Athena facing it. Altars to other gods,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

temples, and statues were in sight, and below stretched the city of Athens, 'wholly given to idolatry,' a state of things that had stirred Paul's spirit within him as he waited there for Silas and Timotheus. While the easy-going Athenians, tolerating the worship of many gods and not believing very seriously in any, waited for his words, Paul must have been well-nigh overwhelmed with the greatness of his message and his opportunity. Here was no danger of mob violence and persecution. It was rather that of too great indifference and light-mindedness. How could he stir them? How could he make them realise that he, who had appeared to some 'a babbler,' to others merely another 'setter forth of strange gods,' could give them that for which they were unconsciously seeking and supply life with meaning? It is easy to imagine how anxiously he asked himself these questions: it is easy also to imagine the thrill of attention through the crowd as he began by an accusation against the philosophers who had rather idly wished to hear him: 'Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.' Then he plunged straight into his subject. On the way up to Areopagus he had been provided with his theme. He had noticed an altar, 'To an unknown God,' and he makes his boldest claim at once, 'Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.' Again we can imagine he looked round about, to the blue southern sky

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

above, to the temples on the hill-sides and the motley crowd at his feet. The 'God that made the world,' he cried, 'seeing that He is Lord of Heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.' The gradual widening of the Jewish conception of God reaches its culmination in the message to the Greeks: 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.' The effect of this speech also is recorded. The resurrection of the dead proved a stumbling-block for many who had listened to the close, but while some mocked, others wished to hear him again, and 'certain men clave unto him and believed.'

Two other speeches of St. Paul, given in the Acts of the Apostles, were made under great emotional stress, for on them depended his liberty if not his life. In each, his ready use of appropriate argument is remarkable. Before the Roman Felix he emphasises that he, Paul, is a strict observer of the law – a fact that he knew would appeal to a Roman, a lover of law and order. He reminds King Agrippa that he is happy to come before one so learned in Jewish customs, and bases his arguments on familiar Jewish tradition, as he did in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia.

The recorded effect of his eloquence constantly bears witness to its power. On each occasion the effect is remarkable. His farewell at Miletus to the Christians from Ephesus uttered in a subdued tone

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

of intimate personal appeal, moves them to expressions of deep sorrow and affection. On the second Sabbath at Antioch the news that he was going to preach, brought the whole population to hear him. At Lystra the crowd acclaimed him as the divinely eloquent Mercury. On the castle steps, a chained prisoner, as we have seen, he kept an infuriated, unreasoning mob in 'great silence' while he told them graphically the story of his conversion. 'Almost,' said King Agrippa, when his pleading ended, 'almost thou persuadest me to to be a Christian.' Felix trembled before him, and Festus and Agrippa would willingly have set him free.

Such results are in themselves sufficient witness to the orator's outstanding ability and to the greatness of his emotional and intellectual gifts. Even in the abbreviated form in which, no doubt, the speeches are recorded, we recognise their power.

Judged by the standards set by the greatest orators, St. Paul occupies a high place among those whose eloquence has moved mankind and swayed the course of human history. Cicero says that accurate knowledge and learning are essential to great oratory. We have seen how, on more than one occasion, St. Paul gave evidence of these possessions and of swift adaptability in their use. Judgment, another quality insisted on by Cicero, was a marked feature of his agility of mind. A

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

direct and concise style aided his clear thinking; and though we have no outside verdict on his eloquence, it is certain that Cicero's further demand for 'dignity of delivery' was fulfilled, by the man who could quiet a crowd thirsting to kill him; could persuade governors and kings of the rightness of his cause; and could, in one speech, draw to his side some of the sceptical philosophers in Athens. Courage, perhaps, is his foremost quality. He gave his message with the utmost fearlessness – whether to his own antagonistic compatriots, to the great ones of the earth who had his life in their hands, or to the idolators on whose interests and prejudices it was – as he and they knew – a direct and devastating attack. 'The best man,' says another ancient authority, Quintilian, 'makes the best orator.' The final secret of St. Paul's power lies here.

With the message contained in his oratory borne verbally to Jew and Gentile, before he penned his wonderful epistles, Jewish ideas and ideals are carried over from the national to the universal, and the literature that bears the message, passes out of Jewish literary history and becomes the general property of mankind.

CHAPTER XIII

SOME LETTERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

OUT of twenty-seven books in the New Testament, twenty-one are in letter form. They are all described as 'Epistles,' and as a literary art epistle-writing is to be distinguished from the writing of letters. The epistle proper is the product of much more conscious art than the letter. It is meant for a wide public, and has something of the character of a written speech, designed for preservation. A letter, on the other hand, is spoilt by signs of conscious art. Its interest is, as a rule, passing, and it is essentially individual and intimate. The letter indeed is individual above any other form of literature. If any doubt this let him get from a friend the subject-matter of a letter, and write it on his behalf. When it is returned for comment it will be surprising if there is much that is approved. What one puts as opening, the other would end with; what seems to one curt is to the other too wordy; what one has emphasised the other would pass over lightly; and this is not only because no two persons have the same mental

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

background, but also because a good letter is always the product of two minds – the writer's and the recipient's – and mutual relations are bound to differ.

The epistles of the New Testament have features characteristic both of the technical epistle and of the letter. They are several of them addressed to a wide public and are obviously intended to be more than merely ephemeral; but they have one particular aim, and they express much intrinsic personal feeling. This intimate, emotional quality is to be found in all St. Paul's Epistles, and in the second and third Epistles of John. These two Epistles of John, and four among St. Paul's, those to Philemon, Timothy, and Titus,¹ are all addressed, not to groups but to individuals. These may therefore be classed as letters proper, rather than as epistles, and for that reason they are chosen as the subject of study in this chapter.

The whole of the New Testament was written in colloquial Greek, such as was widely spoken at the time round a large part of the Mediterranean shores. A colloquial language is specially suitable for use in letters. It is flexible and expressive, and these qualities are traceable even in translations. Such phrases as St. Paul's 'old wives' fables; 'Fight the good fight'; 'profane and vain babblings'; 'in season and out of season' are coined by one

¹ The authorship of the Epistles to Timothy and Titus is not certain.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

familiar with the language of the people, and able to give it his own characteristically incisive stamp. It was one speaking to the ordinary people, in language appropriate to their ways of living, who could appeal to them with statements, to which their experience would immediately respond, such as: 'godliness with contentment is great gain'; or 'having food and raiment let us be there-with content'; and could be sure of a measure of their agreement, on reflection, with such a generalisation as 'The love of money is the root of all evil.' St. Paul speaks from his own experience to the experience of those to whom he was writing, and this gives his letters practicality and persuasiveness. The personal appeal and the particular object are both characteristic features of the letter proper.

A beautiful letter is the short one to Philemon, pleading for the converted refugee slave, Onesimus. It is one of those written from Rome during imprisonment. It follows the structure which letters have roughly followed in all ages, and the outline may be given once for all. It opens with a salutation to the recipient. This leads up to some general remarks and opens to the particular subject which is developed at length. A salutation (and in the case of these religious letters, a blessing), comes at the close.

The letter is sent actually in the name of both Timothy and Paul, but soon the first person

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

singular is adopted with Paul as sole writer. There is a dignity about the salutation which, if it is conventional in form, was assuredly meant by St. Paul:

‘Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’

Praise and thanks are expressed for the good life led by Philemon, and then, with consummate tact and delicacy, the object of the letter is made clear. The relations between Paul and Philemon are such that Paul might well have commanded, but he prefers to win over. As ‘Paul the aged,’ and a prisoner, he beseeches Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, who is to the Apostle as a son. In sending an escaped slave back to his master, Paul knows that he is sending him to one who has the legal right to inflict death upon him. He would have liked to keep Onesimus in Rome, and obviously could have done so, but the standards of the time made it only honest for him to give Philemon the chance of acquiring his property again: and he sends him back because ‘without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity but willingly.’ The implication that it would be of benefit to Philemon to set him free is delicately conveyed, and St. Paul’s passion for persuasion as the only genuine way of convincing others, is here set forth as a principle. He did not condemn slavery as such: to expect him to do so would be to make a more than un-

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

reasonable demand upon him to be centuries ahead of his time; but his next plea contains in it the principle which must in reality be the death-blow of slavery. A man who is 'brother beloved . . . in the Lord' cannot be kept in slavery.

It would be a hard-hearted Christian who would refuse Paul's tender pleading written 'with my own hand,' as he says, and fail to yield to the affection in such a request as 'Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord,' or to such certainty of response as is expressed in 'Having confidence in thy obedience I write unto thee, *knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*' Paul was well aware of the psychological effect of expecting the best from a person.

There is no record in the Bible of what befell Onesimus; but tradition assigns him a high place as an honoured bishop in the Christian Church.

The Epistles to Timothy (first and second) and to Titus, are similar in their general aim. They are all three written to strengthen and direct the recipients in their pastoral tasks of organisation, and the first point of interest to notice, is how they illustrate the contention that a letter is partly written by its recipient. One concludes from reading these letters that Timothy was the more beloved, and – to Paul – the more attractive, and that Titus was the stronger character. The letters to Timothy might be entitled 'Letters of Encouragement.' His responsibility as a minister at Ephesus,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

where he had been left to organise the Church, is emphasised in the first letter. He is given careful instructions, both for the control of his flock and for his personal life, and enjoined to 'keep that which is committed to thy trust.' In the second letter there is implied anxiety, in the reminder, made personal by the 'thou,' that 'God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.' 'Thou, therefore, my son,' Paul bids him, 'be strong,' and 'endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.'

The style of the letters is influenced by the certainty of the writer. There are no subjunctive moods in St. Paul's writing. He goes very directly to his subject in clearly thought-out sections. '*I know* whom I have believed.' 'The Lord knoweth them that are His,' are characteristic utterances. There is no lurking doubt in the quiet assurance:

'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course – I have kept the faith:

'Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them that love His appearing.'

He draws on his own experience to help Timothy. All had forsaken him at his first trial, but 'the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me,' and he is certain this will continue. A notable

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

feature in all his writing is the logical development of thought and the clear and complete treatment of every section of his subject-matter. When he is giving instructions about the Church, no section is omitted, and the reasons for the instructions are not forgotten. Thus, a bishop must rule his own house well, 'for if a man knows not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?' Examples of this continual supplying of reasons could easily be multiplied and are a feature of the style. This method works in with St. Paul's love of balance and contrast – which is another marked feature. The injunction to endure hardness is enforced by quotation of a characteristic series: 'For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him: If we suffer we shall also reign with Him: If we deny Him, He also will deny us: If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself.'

It has been said that the variety of adjectives he has at his command is the test of a man's culture. St. Paul would come well out of this test, and his adjectives are not mere repetition. Each adds some shade of meaning that is necessary: 'The King is eternal, immortal, invisible.' The servant of the Lord should be 'gentle, apt to teach, patient.' Nouns and phrases used in a qualifying or descriptive sense are added one to another in the same way:

'All scripture is given by inspiration of God,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and is profitable *for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction.*'

Each of these might be expanded into a sentence – by a less-skilled craftsman.

One passage deserves to be quoted whole, as a supreme example of this cumulative concentration of adjectives and nouns:

'This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

'For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy.

'Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good.

'Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.

'Having a form of Godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away' – 2 Timothy iii, 1–5 (A.V.).

Timothy, in contrast, 'hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, charity, patience, persecutions, afflictions.'

But St. Paul is no waster of words. Not one of all these nouns and adjectives could be removed without doing injury to the meaning. Where the meaning requires it he can, as has been already

illustrated, write with dignified simplicity, and he does so particularly when he is uttering profound truths with a practical application to life. His style is responsive to the purpose for which the particular passage is designed. To persuade, he makes use of a wide variety of illustrations and comparisons, and there is an avoidance of monotony. Sometimes there are flowing and sonorous passages; at other times simple and dignified statement. St. Paul is a master of his instrument.

The Epistle to Titus, who is in charge in Crete, has many of the same characteristics as the Epistles to Timothy. The opening is rather more formal and there is a less personal touch throughout. There is evidently a good deal that is morally wrong with the Cretans and St. Paul does not mince matters. With characteristic contrast and cumulative description he lays down that the bishop himself 'must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre, but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate.' There are many in Crete who need his example. St. Paul quotes a saying: 'The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies,' and makes the downright comment, 'This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply.' An example of a profound saying in simple language, but carefully balanced phraseology, is the statement that follows later in Chapter i:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.’

Interested in all aspects of human relations, this energetic thinker gives systematic instructions applicable to every stage in life. They are a little more formal than in the more affectionate letter to Timothy, and the chief interest is the light they throw on St. Paul’s conscientiousness in his task and his practical outlook. The need for care to maintain good works as an evidence of belief is the final emphasis of the letter.

It is an interesting speculation, to try to think out the kind of letter that St. Paul would have written to ‘the elect lady and her children’ if he had written in the place of St. John, ‘the beloved disciple.’¹ The letter would, no doubt, have been more weighty, and would have contained a great deal more instruction! But although St. John’s epistle is not of general importance, we would not exchange its warm and respectful friendliness for anything more dogmatic and less as between fellow-Christians. St. John is writing to a Christian lady whom he loves ‘in the truth.’ He rejoices with her in happy sympathy that her children also

¹ Assuming, in lack of evidence to the contrary, that the second and third Epistles of John are by the Apostle, and that the second, like the third, is addressed to an individual and her children and not, as has been suggested, to a Church and its members.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

walk 'in truth.' He beseeches her concerning one thing and one thing only, 'that we love one another.' 'And this is love, that we walk after His commandments.' He shows that he can be stern towards those who hold false doctrine, whom he bids her not to receive; and he closes this short letter, as he closes the one to Gaius (the third Epistle) with the explanation that has shortened many a letter through the centuries, that he will not write more, because he is looking forward with joy to seeing her soon! Clear, simple, and yet full of dignity, this is a typical *letter* of a very human character. We can imagine its recipient keeping it among her treasures.

The letter to Gaius is a little less intimate, but friendliness is again a keynote. Expression of concern that Gaius's health may prosper 'even as thy soul prospereth,' leads to praises of his work in the Church and of his hospitality. Blame for an erring member and commendation for one of whom there is good report give opportunity for a concise and balanced definition:

'He that doeth good is of God; but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.'

This characteristic and far-reaching statement is the heart of the letter's message.

We learn nothing in St. John's letters of the circumstances of the writer, and yet we feel that there runs through them a strong personal interest. Like the more important ones of St. Paul, these

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

short letters reveal his mind, like a deep sunlit pool, joyous, steadfast, undisturbed by surface currents. He has made up his mind what matters, his sense of values is fixed, and his anchorage sure.

Even in the absence of personal references, a great interest of all letters is their revelation of the writer, as well, as we have noticed, of the recipient. They have also the advantage that their practical and definite object is an aid to effectiveness. This definiteness made them a specially suitable instrument of expression for the logical mind of St. Paul. The picture of the errors and difficulties of the early Church, depicted even in those shorter epistles to individuals, to which we have confined our examination, is invaluable. Sidelights on character, on social customs; the relations between men and women; between masters and servants, and slaves; between prisoners and those in authority; between the bishops and their flocks; between age and youth, are full of interest. And perhaps the final word on the New Testament letters should be to lay emphasis on their immense historical importance, as a many-sided reflection of the vitally important formative period in Christian story.

CHAPTER XIV

VISION AND PROPHECY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

IN considering the prophets of the Old Testament, we left out any examination of the Prophet Daniel. His writings alone among them belong to a type of prophecy that is not developed at length elsewhere in the Old Testament, but is the kind which occupies the whole of the last book in the Bible, the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

Apocalyptic prophecy has many references to the shortly expected end of the world. A great deal of use is made in it of symbolism rather than of direct reference to historical or to very distant events; and it is in the language of ecstasy that it describes its visions. For all these reasons the Book of the Revelation is perhaps the most difficult to interpret of all the books of the Bible. It is, moreover, full of problems of criticism, problems as to author and date and language; and into none of these – the critics still differ on most of them – do we propose to enter. But in spite of the difficulties, it contains passages of such great literary beauty, visions of such glorious imagination, that a volume

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

on Bible literature would be incomplete without some reference to its pages.

Those who have been interested in the Book of the Revelation, have been so mainly for two different reasons. To some it has, like Daniel's visions, had the attraction of a puzzle which ingenuity may solve – and some, indeed, have been very dogmatic over their solutions. To others the marvellous restfulness of its promises to the blessed, the richness of its visions of final redemption and the beauty of its imagery in certain passages have been resting-places for the soul and a source of rich satisfaction to the æsthetic sense. It is mainly to these latter sections that our examination will be confined.

We will turn before this, however, to the perhaps equally familiar and loved opening sections of the book, where the letters to the Seven Churches which are in Asia are to be found. The high claim and assurance of John, the servant of God, may be compared with that of the earlier prophets. They wrote, as we saw, under a keen sense of divine guidance in the delivery of their message. The opening verse of this book, differing from the traditional title, ascribes the Revelation to 'Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show unto His servants.' John is only the vehicle for the messages which follow. In the spirit he 'has heard a great voice as of a trumpet' – a voice to which he could not, if he would, have turned a deaf ear,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

telling him to write in a book the messages he was to give. An extraordinarily vivid, picturesque, and characteristic vision is that which he describes as meeting his eyes when he turns to see where the voice comes from. Any reader who has not read the Book of Revelation for some time, is likely to be surprised on re-reading it at the great number of familiar quotations. The encouragement given to John is in words known wherever there are members of the Christian Church:

‘Fear not; – I am the first and the last:

‘I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death’ (A.V.). ‘His voice as the sound of many waters’ is a simile as rich as it is beautiful.

The messages to the Seven Churches have first and foremost great historical interest. It is likely that seven were chosen because seven is a perfect number. It recurs constantly in the succeeding visions. But the messages, no doubt, are meant as warnings and instructions to the Church as a whole, although each of the Seven has a distinctive message, so that repetition is avoided. They reveal to us, towards the end of the first century of the Church’s history, danger from persecution, and a zeal that has in many cases cooled down. Commendation of good works comes first where that is possible, and then, if needed, condemnation of error. We get, in familiar phrases, the judgments which have, from the aptness of their appeal,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

passed into proverbs. Ephesus is warned, 'Thou hast left thy first love.' Smyrna is prepared for persecution with the promise which has encouraged the sore-pressed and weary through the centuries: 'Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' In a sentence, the state of the Church at Sardis is pictured: 'Thou has a name that thou livest and art dead,' but to the few there comes the encouragement:

'He that overcometh the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.'

Philadelphia is bidden: 'Hold that fast which thou hast; that no man take thy crown'; and most familiar of all, perhaps, is the message to the Laodiceans. It is so familiar that it has given a meaning to the proper name:

'I know thy works that thou art neither cold nor hot: would thou wert cold or hot.'

Indifference is the worst sin, and it goes with ignorance of their own lamentable condition of spiritual poverty, blindness, and nakedness, in spite of material riches. The beautiful plea made to these lukewarm people suggested to Holman Hunt one of his finest pictures, *The Light of the World*, now in St. Paul's Cathedral.

'Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.'

It is no cause for surprise that popular affection has fastened on these letters to the Churches as repaying intimate study and of permanent worth; for apart from all other considerations they are great literature, with a human appeal that is fundamental.¹

In some of the choruses, seven in number also, which close different dections of the visions, there is marvellous poetry. Phrase after phrase haunts the imagination and evokes in the reader's mind just the impression aimed at, one feels, by the Seer. In the Chorus of the Redeemed, what a picture is called up by the phrase 'ten thousand times ten thousand,' descriptive of the angels round about the throne. First comes the mighty chorus :

'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing.'

And then the echoing response from every created thing:

'Blessing and honour, and glory and power, be

¹ The quotations here are taken from the Authorised Version, because it is this with which readers are most familiar, and it is the exact and often the isolated quotation that is loved.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.'

The majestic march is like organ music. One word is added to another with a wonderful mastery of language and power of suggestion. As was noticed in the case of St. Paul's multiplication of adjectives and nouns, none is superfluous. Mention always of the multitudes who share in the praise, of the sounds in nature to which the volume of noise may be compared, helps to create that sense of God's final triumph and victory, which the Book is written to evoke. It is the mighty thunderings of a multitude in the last Chorus of Triumph which ring out with one voice: 'Alleluia; for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth – Let us be glad and rejoice and give honour to Him.' The overwhelming forces of creation are in God's service.

The most-loved passages of the Book, however, are not in the letters or in the choruses. They are to be found in the scattered visions of the final state of the redeemed, and in the vision at the close, of the new heaven and the new earth. As long as there is weariness which longs for rest, with aspirations towards better things, as long as man is man, these will not lose their appeal.

Listen again – for all know it – to the description of those who are sealed, the servants of God, and who are seen standing before His throne in white raiments and with palms in their hands:

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

‘These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

‘Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

‘They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

‘For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.’ – Revelation vii, 14-17.

In the vision of the new heaven and the new earth, some of these promises are repeated and others added. Then, when God dwells with men:

‘there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.

‘And He that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. . . . I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely.

‘He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be My son.’

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Comment is silenced and interpretation superfluous.

Terrible in their relentlessness as are the visions of destruction, the writer of the Book of the Revelation, whether or not it was John the Apostle, had learnt much from suffering, and had loved much; and the contrast between the calm in heaven and the turmoil on earth, between the miseries of the lost and the final blessedness of the redeemed enhances the effect of each picture.

Wonderful also, is the vision of the New Jerusalem. The whole impression is one of glorious, but not dazzling, light. The city as it descends out of heaven is described as:

‘Having the glory of God; and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal’ – a description impossible to paraphrase, and yet embodying a definite conception. The magic of romantic sounding and concrete names is illustrated in the description of the foundations. How much less effective this would have been if it had stopped with the mere statement that ‘the foundations were garnished with all manner of precious stones.’ Few readers could even assign their colours to the twelve stones named, yet to read them is a pleasure: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald; sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl; topaz, chrysoprasus, jacinth, amethyst, and every several gate was of one pearl,

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

and the street of pure gold.' We must go to Milton to match such usage.

In this city, permeated by the presence of God, there is no need of a temple or special place for worship; and neither sun nor moon need shine, 'for the glory of God did lighten it and the lamb is the light thereof'; and with night and its fears banished the gates of the city need never be closed. The river of the water of life is there, and the tree of life, to which the blessed have access. And the gracious promise of blessing is extended beyond individuals, for 'the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.' The introduction of flowing water and foliage adds a softening, realistic touch to the picture.

In sheer beauty of colour and imagery the poetry of many passages in the Book of the Revelation is a delight. Where no attempt is made to put a meaning to them, or to think them out in concrete form, they are full of fascination, even for a child with imagination.

For those who have thought, and still more for those who have experienced and felt more deeply, there is added the emotional appeal of the promised triumph of good and the overthrow of evil; of reward for those who have striven and not despaired; the crown of attainment after struggle. Here is no mechanical conception of a human Utopia. The exact meaning does not matter and dogmatic interpretation may be left on one side.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Beauty of language, beauty of rhythm, beauty of conception and spiritual insight all play their part; but the enduring appeal for humanity of the Seer's vision lies in the glorious promises of consolation and refreshment offered in passage after passage for aspiring but sore-tried and thirsting human souls.

CHAPTER XV

SOME NOTES ON THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

THE first Bible in English which, with a little perseverance, we could read to-day, is that known as Wycliffe's Bible. Its translation was completed in the 1380's, and it was the first complete Bible in the English tongue. It was not entirely the work of the courageous and saintly Vicar of Lutterworth, whose name it bears; but its production was due to his determination to give to the people of England their own 'property' in their own language. The translation was based on the Latin Vulgate, for in Wycliffe's day neither the Greek nor the Hebrew texts were available.

When Tyndale, the next translator of the Bible, began to work, a hundred years later, he had available for his use Erasmus's 'Greek Testament', published 1516, and some Hebrew manuscripts, though these were not themselves of very early date. Suffering persecution and exile, he produced in 1526, at Worms, his first edition of the New Testament – and then, while other revised and 'corrected' editions followed during his lifetime, he turned his attention to the Old Testament.

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

When he met a martyr's death, imprisoned through trickery at Vilvorde, in 1536, he had published the books of Genesis and Jonah, and had completed the translation of nine other books of the Old Testament.

Three years after his death, the open Bible, for which he had striven and died, was set up in English churches, and the King was its champion and advocate. Meanwhile other translations had appeared in English, of which the most important is that of Coverdale, in 1535. Coverdale was largely responsible also for the great Bible of 1539, but as well as making use of his own earlier translation as a basis for it, he made much use of a revision of Tyndale's Bible; so the faith of the pioneer and martyr was not only vindicated, but his actual work came into the direct line of development which was later to give us our Authorised Version.

Early in the reign of Elizabeth, in the year 1660, there was brought to England the version known as the Genevan Bible. Its production was of interest as the work of a group of scholars, exiles in Geneva – the Protestant stronghold of Calvin and his followers. It was an excellent translation and had wide circulation. Another (and a poorer) translation, made mainly by a group of bishops, was completed in 1568, and was known as the Bishops' Bible. The time was drawing near when the need of one standard version, accepted as *the* recognised

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

translation, was to be met. In January 1604, at the Hampton Court Conference of Bishops and Clergy under the presidency of King James I, a Puritan leader voiced the need. He at once gained the support of the King, who objected very much to the attitude to crowned heads taken up in some of the notes of the Genevan Bible. By July the King had chosen fifty-four translators to undertake the work, and had allotted the books of the Bible to different groups in Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. Bishops, deans, professors – the most learned scholars of the time were among them. A committee was also chosen to revise the work when completed, and by 1611 the first 'edition' of the Authorised Version was published. Although the translators went for themselves to all the documents then available, they profited also by the work of the previous translators, and Tyndale and Coverdale's editions both made their contribution.

For two hundred and fifty years the Authorised Version was the Bible of the people. Its stately language, its dignified and graceful rhythm, its memorable phraseology, have not only made it part of the literary heritage of the British people, but have, in turn, influenced our language and literature more than can be estimated. It was only when changes in the meanings of some words had rendered certain passages obscure, and when the discovery and scholarly examination of fresh and more ancient sources than the translators of

THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

the seventeenth century had at their disposal, had made it possible to throw new light on others, that in 1870 a Revised Version was decided upon by Convocation on the suggestion of Bishop Wilberforce. The utmost care was again taken to choose those most fitted for the task. Revision, comparison, correction, and further revision were arranged for. Scholars in the United States of America were called in to assist. It was fourteen years before the whole was completed and published, in May 1885. It embodied the conclusions of the ripest scholarship and ablest criticism available, working on material largely discovered only in the nineteenth century. Among improvements in the setting out of the text is the fact that in the Revised Version prose and Hebrew verse forms are clearly distinguished. For this reason it has been used in several instances in the foregoing pages; but the stateliness, the beauty and the unchallengeable inspiration of the language of the Authorised Version have endeared it to the hearts of generations of Englishmen, and it is to that version we shall, no doubt, turn most readily, as to a friend for refreshment, and in time of need for guidance and consolation. It is the Bible as handed down to us in the Authorised Version which has recently been described, surely without fear of contradiction, as 'the most majestic thing in our literature and the most spiritually living thing we inherit.'

BS535

94980

I5

Innes

The Bible as literature

BS535

94980

I5

Innes

The Bible as literature

LIBRARY
LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY
Harrogate, Tennessee 37752

LINCOLN MEMORIAL UNIV. LIBRARY



3 5040 80821 2885